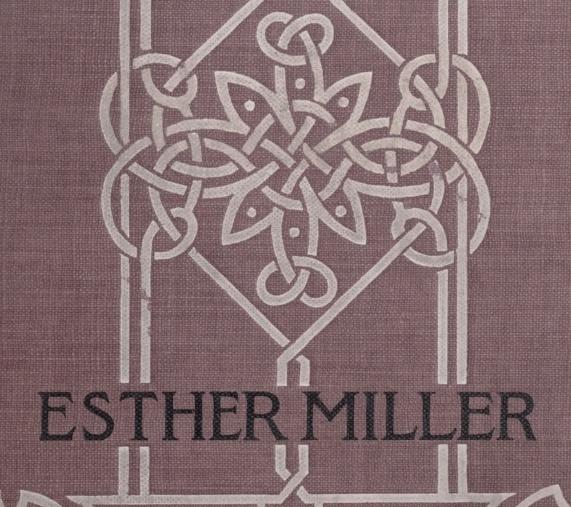
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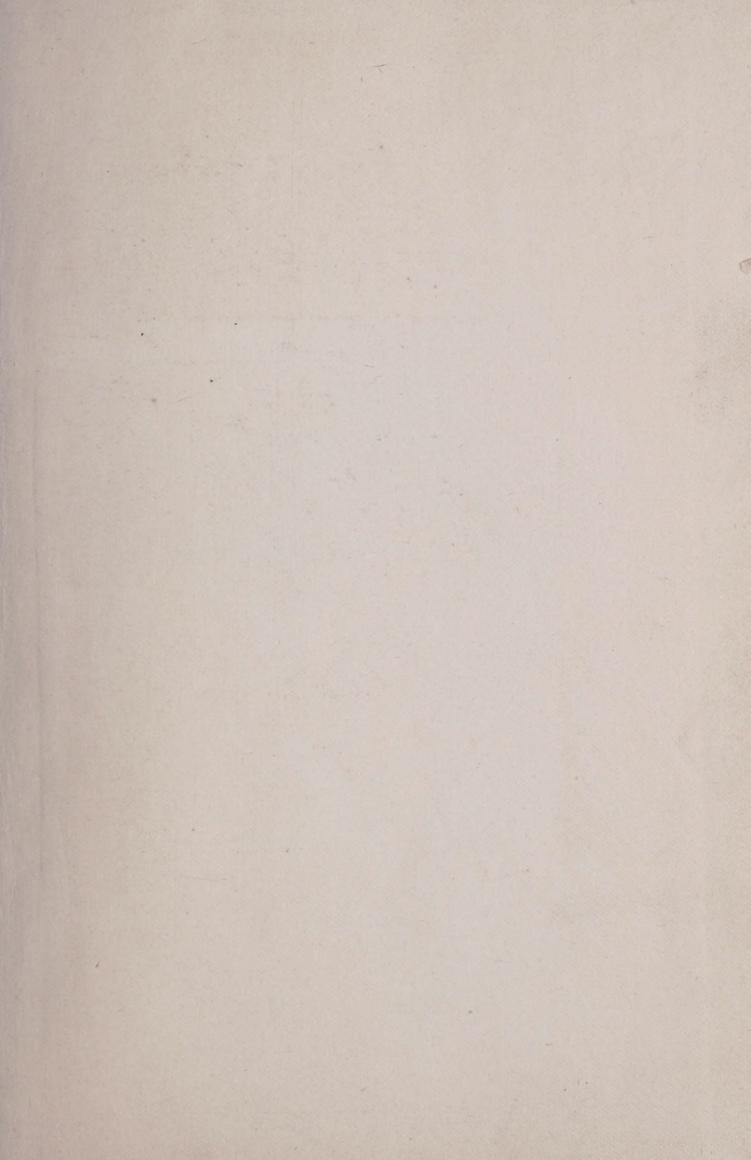


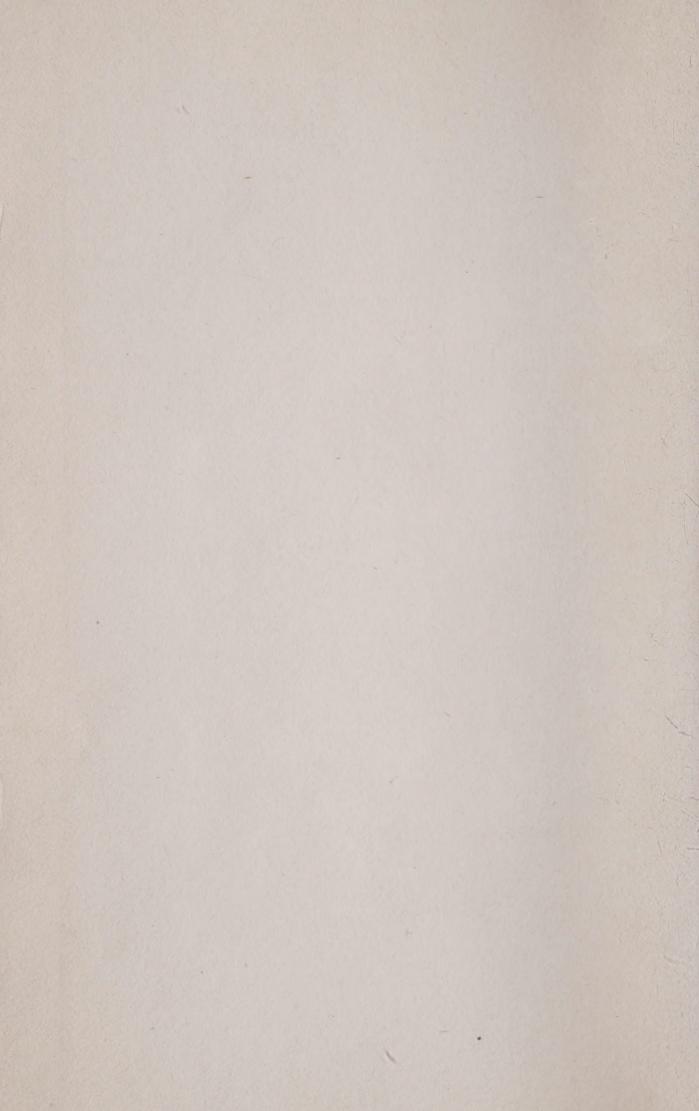
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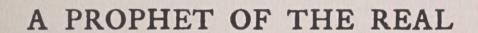
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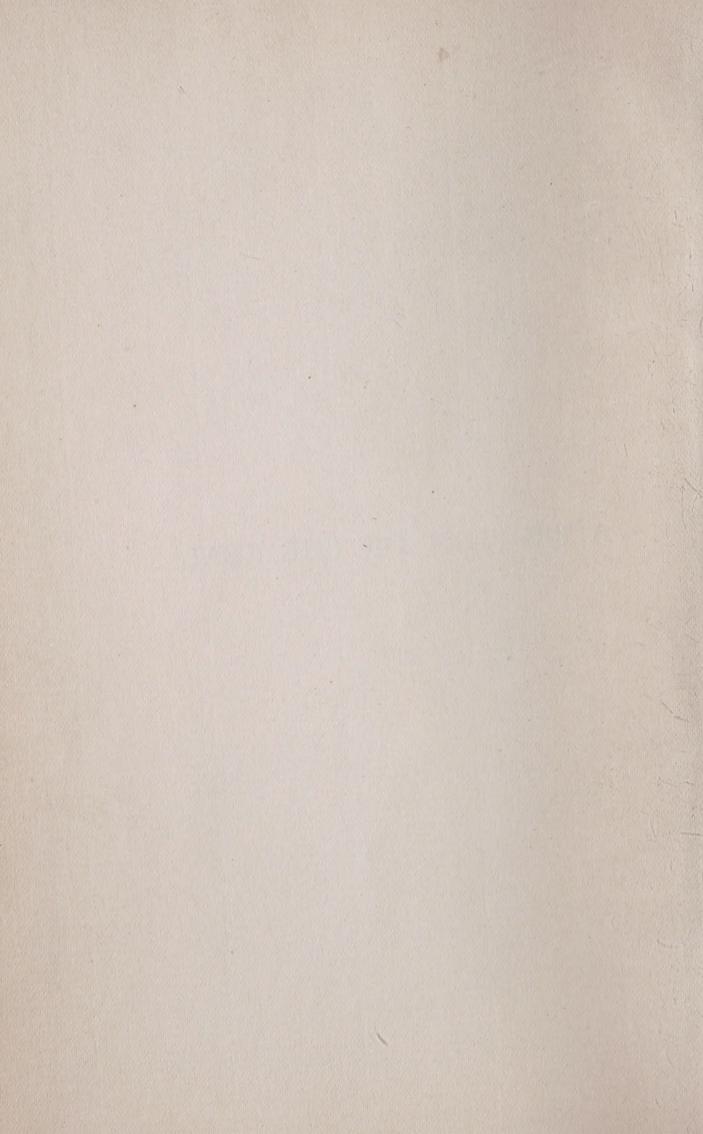
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"She sprang up, hastily replaced the manuscript, and unlocked the door." Page 172.

A PROPHET OF THE REAL * *

By

ESTHER MILLER

Author of

"THE SPORT OF THE GODS," ETC., ETC.



NEW YORK

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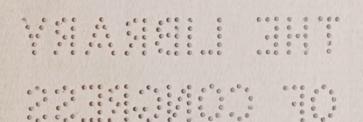
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Chapter I

ERSCHOYLE glanced at the clock impatiently. It was a quarter to ten. Usually he began work at half-past nine, but his secretary had not come yet, and his brain was simmering with ideas which would not wait.

He took a couple of turns round the room, stopped for a moment at the window to look down on the turmoil in Victoria Street, and became absorbed in thought. The flat was high and quiet, and well furnished. Anthony Verschoyle had a cultivated taste, and the means of a successful modern novelist. The bronzes and pictures were admirable, the decorations and upholstery a soothing harmony in green.

As for the man himself he seemed the natural component and creator of his environment. There was no trace of either effeminacy or brutality in his clean-shaven face. He was impressive. His voice had the note of authority and composure which proceeds from self-reliance. His clear-cut features, medium colouring, grey eyes, and well-knit figure, were the materialization of a vigourous body and mind.

For a week the book—his new book—had lain aside for lack of an inspiration. He had played on other strings meanwhile. Now—it had been born in the night, the missing idea he sought, and he felt that he could make headway again.

Ten struck. Impatience mastered him, and he sat down at the writing-table alone.

Just then an electric bell rang. A few moments later a girl came into the room. She was shabby, but neat, in black. She was white-faced, darkeyed, thin, and twenty-two years old, with the experience of fifty. Her manner was nervous this morning, which was unusual; ordinarily she had the composure of her class; but it might be that she was a little afraid of him, or of losing her place.

"I beg your pardon for being so late," she said.
"I overslept myself."

"Never mind," said Verschoyle, politely. He got up without looking at her, intent upon the MS.

he had been glancing through, and the girl took her place at the blotting-pad, and unscrewed her fountain pen. It was his habit to dictate to her in shorthand, which she converted into neat typing when he had gone out; he could not endure the tapping of the machine.

"We'll leave the letters," he added, "till by-andby. They don't press, and I want to get on with that book."

"Yes," she said, in toneless obedience.

"Will you kindly read it through to me? I'll make some alterations."

The girl began to read. Her voice was refined, and occasionally pathetic, but she endeavoured to restrain it to the monotony of a machine. She was the secretary; it was obvious that the fact was impressed upon her mind. Verschoyle did not employ her to declaim.

The story was in its infancy. Only the first chapter, in fact, was written. So far anybody—almost anybody—might have created it, although it was the originality as well as the realism of Verschoyle which had given him his place among the first half-dozen novelists of the day. What he had portrayed was merely the meeting of an orphan girl working for her living in London, with a young city man of fair position, whose proposal of marriage she receives with a gasp of thanksgiving, as the release

from daily toil and strife for bread. There was no suggestion of love on her side, and a hint of mystery about the girl cropped up at the end of the chapter, to be explained probably, in the next.

The author made a few amendments, and halfan-hour had passed by the time the last line was reached.

"'She wondered if she had done right to accept him."

Verschoyle, who had been lying on the sofa, rose, and began to walk about the room.

"'She wondered if she had done right to accept him.' You see," he continued, "she is in a deuce of a predicament, poor girl! She has a secret and what she has to decide upon is, whether she owes more duty to him than to herself."

"I see," said the secretary.

She looked surprised that he should trouble to explain himself to her; he rarely did so; it was seldom, indeed, that he spoke to her at all except in the way of business. They had had no confidences in the three months that she had been with him, not the least intimacy; he was not the man to expand promiscuously, although he could be genial enough in genial company, and her reserve was of the aggravated kind which walks through life with lips grown thin from compression, and sombre eyes. To-day he was so pleased at overcoming a difficulty, that

he broke through his usual reticence with a flush and a smile.

"Begin, please," he said, and dictated:

"From the moment she had discerned that he would ask her to marry him one day, she had been pondering this question, but never so earnestly as now. She ought to tell him, but if she did she would lose him and the home he could give her. His was not a great mind. Nobody understood his limitations better than she. He would make her a kind husband, but his smug respectability would shrink from the secret which had lain, a hidden horror in her breast for years. God knows how she had suffered over it, and prayed that it might not drive her mad! This man had seemed to bring peace with him-peace and rest, but there was none for her. He was the apotheosis of all the suburban virtues, and she was the daughter of a murderess who had been hanged for her crime!"

The girl at the table started, and dropped her pen, and raised a bloodless face, quivering, hunted, aghast.

"It is the story of my life!" she cried. "How did you know?"

Chapter II

HE story of your life!" repeated Verschoyle, incredulously.
"Yes—all of it—all of it!"

"Of course I didn't know. What a remarkable coincidence!"

The shock of surprise had almost taken his breath away. He gazed in a sort of stupefaction at the girl, who had risen and stood with her back against the table, grasping it, her cheeks white, her lips white, her dark eyes wild, dilated, her bosom panting under her shabby gown.

"If I had told it to you, it could scarcely be truer. But I know more than you, clever as you are. It is here,"—she struck her breast—"the agony which you have only imagined, which I have felt! Oh, the shame, the misery, the anguish of my life!"

She stopped and sobbed. It was evident that she had forgotten where she was, that her self-consciousness, restraint, subservience of service were alike swept away by a torrent of emotion. She talked because she had to talk, and Verschoyle,

watching her, wondered if he had never seen her before, or whether the smothered fire that he had fanned to flame had transformed an ordinary girl into the tragic muse, with her great eyes burning in her pale cheeks, her mobile lips, her white forehead, her quivering throat and hands.

"Sit down in the arm-chair," he said, with charming gentleness. "Don't cry. I am very sorry for you. It is most unfortunate that I should have stirred such painful memories. . . Would you like some brandy?"

" N-no."

She had sunk into the chair, her head bowed; stricken, sobbing still.

He stood before her, and his voice when he spoke again was tense.

"Is the affair with the man going on now?"

"Yes, he proposed last night. That was why I slept badly, and was late this morning."

"You have accepted him?"

She nodded.

"And he knows nothing?"

"Nothing." She wiped her eyes without looking up. "It's just like your tale. I don't know what to do."

"Who are you? Tell me all about it."

"Do you remember the Durand case? It happened a long time ago; I was only seven years old."

"I can't recall it," he said, in a low tone. "What did she do?"

The girl rocked herself to and fro in blind agony.

- "She was jealous of my father and she killed him."
 - "Good Lord!"
- "She was hanged. I knew all about it. A servant took me to see the black flag flying over the gaol. I dreamed about it afterwards, and screamed in the night. I dream about it still. I have her portrait taken with my father's during their honeymoon. He was a very handsome man, and she was like I am now, only beautiful; the eyes, the mouth, the colouring are the same. . . . There was no money for me. A public subscription was raised, and I was sent to school till I was seventeen. I have been keeping myself since. I have never spoken about it to any one before, but you startled me—you startled me so."

"Have you no relations or friends?" She shook her head.

"I am alone. At school I thought they whispered about me, and I used to hold aloof for fear of a snub. It was the same afterwards. Oh, you can't realize what it is to be cut off from the world as I am! When people are kind to me I think: 'If they knew who I was they would turn away!' and I feel a hypocrite, and fear to make friends. I never

forget. I don't think that I have ever been happy. Sometimes it seems to me that I shall die if I can't tell somebody what I feel; but I daren't talk about it."

"Go on," said Verschoyle, thoughtfully, "talk to me."

"They say," she whispered, "that it isn't painful to be hanged; just a shock, and then—nothing. But what must she have felt in the days beforehand? To have killed a man, her husband! What a horror must have been upon her—enough to drive her mad; what shame, what sickening fear! And she was going to die. There was the Afterwards to face. What has become of her?"

"Ah, there you raise a difficult question! Are you religious?"

"I don't know. I don't go to church often, because they talk about things that frighten me. Do you think they've met again? She loved him, you know; she must have loved him. Did he hate her, or did he forgive—or is it all nonsense, and was that the end?" She pushed her black hair from her brow feverishly. "I lie awake at night thinking it out till my brain swims and my flesh creeps, and I never seem to get any nearer the truth."

"I think," said Verschoyle, studying her, "that you have lived too much alone. You were wrong to nurse these ideas in silence for so many years. It

would have been better for you to have told every one you met."

"No—no—no," she cried, shrinking. "I should have died of shame. I don't know how I have managed to talk to you like this. I suppose it is because you seem to understand. You won't betray me, will you? You won't think badly of me? It's such a terrible thing for a girl to have fastened on her."

"Of course I won't 'think badly' of you," he answered. "Why should I? You couldn't help it. I pity you with all my heart. But you ought to tell your lover."

"He would give me up!"

"If he is worth his salt it won't make any difference. He will only try to comfort you."

"You say that," she cried, "but you don't make the girl in your book believe it, and I know you mean her to lose him."

"But my lover is a poor little conventional cad, bound to the chariot wheels of Mrs. Grundy."

"And so is mine."

"Will he be any loss, in that case?"

"You wrote it! What is to become of me? I have had such a dreary, lonely life; I am so poor. He is well off; he could give me a home, and he loves me. Nobody else loves me. He is the first

man who has ever noticed me. I might never have another chance, and I might get ill and lose my work at any time; and what should I do when I grew old?"

Verschoyle regarded her with half a smile, the first relaxation of humour; with a little curiosity too, of a different kind—a late interest in the potentialities of her youth and sex.

"You do look for the worst, don't you? Why should you not have another and a better offer by-and-by? You are only a young girl still."

She shook her head, which he noticed for the first time was small, well-shaped, well-set. A shadow brooded in her eyes.

"I am not attractive. I am too dull, too quiet, too sad. Men—most men—like gay women who amuse them; pretty, well-dressed women with parents and friends. Besides, I never meet anybody, and if I do I've no home to ask them to. I don't know why George cares. He's a nephew of the people where I board—not quite a gentleman, you know, but—he loves me. He's my only chance. After all," she said, defiantly, "what is it to do with him who my parents were?"

"Has he asked you?"

"I said that my father was a gentleman. It's true."

"Of course it is your own concern," said Verschoyle. "I can't presume to influence you."

"You think that I ought to tell him, though! Of course you are right." She was conventional again, suddenly—the girl, dull, decorous, subdued, who had passed in and out of his days unobserved. Even the touch of subservience returned. "But before I came to you I was out of employment for weeks, and nearly all my money went. I was so frightened. You don't know how difficult it is for a girl to get on. Do I suit you? Do you mean to keep me? You won't turn me away, will you, if he doesn't want any more to do with me?"

"No," said Verschoyle, gently, "I won't turn you away. I think we are getting on very well, don't you?"

The girl rose.

"You have been very kind to me to-day," she murmured. "I shall never forget. You must have thought me mad to burst out like that; but it has been such a relief to talk. I won't take up any more of your time. Shall we begin to work?"

"Do you feel like it?"

Her lashes drooped.

"I don't mind, I am here to work."

"Go home, and see your lover, and tell me tomorrow what he says."

"You are sure that you can spare me?"

"Yes. Have a glass of wine before you go."

He touched the bell. They both waited silently, eyeing each other sometimes. The girl sipped the wine as though she were not used to it.

"I wish you luck," said Verschoyle, drinking himself.

"Oh, I know what it will be!" she answered, hopelessly "Your book will come true."

"Good-bye," he said, and they shook hands for the first time in their lives. "Mind you come tomorrow—and—and don't fret more than you can help."

Her lips quivered.

When she had gone, Verschoyle threw himself into an arm-chair, and wiped his face.

"Well, this is a new experience," he mused. "I have seen Bernhardt and Duse, but I don't think I ever realized tragedy as keenly before. And what a tragedy! She never rose above the commonplace until to-day. I scarcely looked at her. She was the representative of a class, no more—a type, not a personality. It is the difference, I suppose, between truth and art—or shall we say between art and a temperament combined with truth? A ploughboy would be a dumb repository. She has the sensitiveness of a photographic plate; every emotion is felt, reproduced: passion, tenderness, imagination. Grown to womanhood she lies awake, the child who

saw the black flag flying, and asks herself if that husband and wife have met again. I should never have thought of that! What a touch! There's life in that—the keystone of a character. Good God! how morbid she is! Her white face, her black eyes and hair; the thinness of her, the nervous delicacy of her hands—all just as it should be. . . . I could not have drawn her half as well as she is made."

He rose and paced the room in the restlessness of excitement. It was as though the tragedy he had invented had materialized under his eyes. A ghost, illusive, indistinct, had turned to flesh and blood. He had wondered how to invent her, this girl of gloomy parentage, and he had only to describe. She was here as a model in his hand.

He could not but realize what an opportunity of a lifetime this was for him. Chance had placed it in his power to write a book that should be such a human document as had never been written before. And the subject appealed to him; he had chosen it; he was not being forced into an uncongenial task for the sake of utilizing good material.

"It is strange that it should be now, while she is with me, that the idea should come," he thought. "The coincidence opens up an interesting problem. Is there anything in thought transference? Can

her continual brooding on the one subject have affected me?"

He was intensely anxious to place his new impressions on paper. He hated the manual effort of writing, but it would be easier to do this part of the book without her. If some of the emotions, phrases, ideas, struck her as familiar afterwards, she would merely conclude that he had grafted them upon the character previously conceived.

Flushed enthusiasm kept his pen moving for a couple of solid hours. If he lacked anything, most days, it was that fervour without which the novelist becomes a mere cold-blooded manipulator of words—a Frankenstein creating bodies without a soul. The curious episode of the morning had stirred him powerfully. The feeling was upon him that now, if ever, he was to surpass himself, and write a book that was worthy to live.

When he stopped at last, it was not for want of material. A chilling recollection had brought dismay to his face.

The man might marry her after all! What a pity it would be—how deadly commonplace! Identified with his heroine as she had become, he would find it difficult to contrive an artistic ending to his book. She should have a tragic history; at least her neurotic temperament should expand un-

cramped. It would kill his imagination if she were to settle down into a suburban matron and the mother of babies.

"Although no doubt the less interesting she became, the healthier and the happier she would be, and I am brutal to hope that George's loyalty will prove unequal to the strain," he told himself. "Fortunately or unfortunately, I have no influence in the matter, so my selfishness is not a crime. We shall see!"

It was luncheon time, and a servant came to call him to the dining-room. His excitement had given him an appetite. It had been a morning to set the pulses of a man's life moving faster. He had gone to sleep over that story; he had felt uncertain of his deductions, depressed by misgivings; now he was in his best mood.

What news would she bring to-morrow? He would not have believed a week ago that he could be so interested in this girl.

Chapter III

A LICE DURAND lived at Notting Hill in a tall, shabby house where they took boarders at a guinea a week. Verschoyle only wanted her in the mornings, however, so she was received for ten shillings in return for her services as "lady help" in the afternoons. As he paid her liberally, she was able to put by fifteen shillings a week for clothes, 'bus fares, and emergencies. In fact, she was better off than she had ever been, but experience had taught her the insecurity of every salary in this life.

She reached home with a mixture of sensations:
—the sickness of agitation and suspense, a shrinking consciousness that she had expanded to a stranger and a man who had certainly taken no pains before to gain her confidence or make himself her friend. To her intense reserve this seemed a terrible thing to have done; although it had relieved her over-charged heart, and he had advised her conscientiously, she knew. She grew alternately hot and cold. How could she have unveiled her inmost soul to Anthony Verschoyle? She was

not used to talking about herself. His unconscious hand had opened the floodgates of her soul. The impulse to put into words what she had been feeling with such hideous keenness all her life, had been too strong to resist. The artificial restraint had been broken down by the pent-up emotions of years. The girl had hidden her tragedy, crushed it in her breast till the agony of it had almost driven her mad. It was as though she had screamed at last.

What was her lover going to say to her? She had no hope. If Verschoyle had not put her duty before her, she would have vacillated and tormented herself perhaps to the very eve of the marriage, and spoken then. It was better as it was. Love might have found a guilty happiness, for a few weeks, in the engagement; she did not love her fiancé, so she had nothing to gain by prolonging the suspense.

She was so tired of dependence, servitude, poverty. When she reached her own bedroom at the very top of the tall boarding-house, she took her things off and cast them down with a sort of passion. The means of escape was within her reach, and she must renounce it.

"It's hard," she said, between her teeth, "hard. Am I never to have a little comfort and happiness, a home of my own?"

Her stormy eyes sought their own reflection in

the glass. A lock of black hair fell over her forehead, accentuating its whiteness; her cheeks were colourless; her mutinous lips trembled still over the memory of that storm in Verschoyle's study, and the anticipation of the interview to come.

The prolonged sound of a gong mounted the well of the staircase. She washed her hands and tidied her hair hastily, and went down-stairs.

Luncheon was on the table. A lady of uncertain age, with a golden fringe, was presiding over a cold leg of mutton, and a dish of curry—the mutton in another guise. There were only two or three women and an old man at the table. Most of the boarders were clerks who were absent during the day.

"You are home early," remarked the hostess.

"How's that?"

"Mr. Verschoyle didn't want me any longer this morning."

Mrs. Wilson waved the carving-fork at the dishes.

"Which will you have, my dear?"

The woman was vulgar but good-natured. She had taken Alice to the play in the pit occasionally, and once to Kempton Park races. It was on the latter occasion, in fact, that George Wilson had made the girl's acquaintance.

He was coming to dinner to-night, and she would be able to get her confession over then. Would he

think it necessary to tell his aunt who she was? In any case she would lose the prestige which the engagement had conferred upon her in the boarding-house, where George Wilson with his smart city clothes and gay air was "such a gentleman."

Mrs. Wilson asked her a question twice before she heard it. She was wondering what Anthony Verschoyle, the cultivated, fastidious Oxford man, would think of the dirty tablecloth, the oleographs and "rep" furniture, Mrs. Wilson's golden "front" and slipshod English, and George Wilson when he was trying to tell a funny story.

And yet she, who could see every shortcoming, every vulgarism in her fiancé from the scented oil on his hair and the geranium in his button-hole, to his lamentable ignorance, trembled at the thought of losing him. They had not a thought in common; his point of view on every subject was as "impossible" as his summer clothes; he was no more her equal in refinement than in intellect. His sole merits were that he was fond of her, and could give her a home.

But she had to be thankful for him—grateful that this pacha of Mincing Lane had condescended to throw the handkerchief, and to rehearse her miserable story in order to find phrases which would tell the truth yet shock him least, trembling the

while with fear that he would not consider her good enough to be his wife!

A wild gleam came into the girl's eyes; her breast heaved. In a passion of revolt against her fate, her crushed pride rose, and she felt inclined to fling his ring back to him without a word. Why should she apologize to him—cringe to him for what she was? Why should she humble herself to any man? It was he who was not good enough for her!

She wept again in her room afterwards. She hated the world, outcast that she was through no fault of her own. If only she had had money in her hands, and could afford to hold aloof, wrapped in the reserve of a defiant and despairing melancholy. The humiliation of her dependence upon this man ate like vitriol into her soul. Her pride which had survived her tragic parentage, fought in her breast with her weariness of the life she led, its insecurity, the dread she had mentioned to Verschoyle of what her future might be if this one chance of marriage passed her by.

When George came to dinner—a slim, sloping-shouldered young man, with an unwholesome complexion—he had tickets for the theatre.

She sat out the *Greek God*, deaf and blind to the vulgar tinselled folly which kept her lover in a roar, postponing the evil moment in an agony of apprehension which made her despise herself.

They entered a hansom to go home, and she shrank from the lamplight and the man's familiar arm. All her carefully-rehearsed phrases had melted away. But the inevitable moment had come.

"I've something to tell you, George."

"Eh, old girl?"

"My mother was hanged," she said.

George Wilson stared at her blankly. It took him a long time to grasp a new idea. In the present instance the idea was so startling that it produced an effect natural upon his order of mind.

"Oh, you are joking," he said, with a feeble chuckle. "Your mother was hanged! That's a good 'un, by Jove!"

"I am not joking," said Alice, steadily.

"I'll tell aunt when we get to the house," he said. "Won't it startle all the old ladies! I say, what are you looking so glum for? I'm meant to laugh, ain't I?"

"It's not a joke," repeated Alice. "Oh, can't you understand what it is costing me to tell you? I thought you ought to know before you married me."

The young man was silent for a moment. His face had grown bewildered and pale, and he stammered when he essayed to speak at last.

"Do you—do you mean that it's really true?—no humbug, you know?"

"Haven't I said so three times already? She killed my father through jealousy, and she was hanged fifteen years ago."

"What an awful woman!"

The girl shrank.

"I suppose she was in a passion. It's very terrible. But it isn't my fault. I couldn't help it."

A sullen flush of anger overspread Wilson's pasty complexion.

"I've been badly treated," he said. "It's been kept from me. I ought to have been told before."

"Now you are angry," she said, in a tone of despair. "It was because I feared you would be, that I found it so difficult to confess. What is the use of resenting it on me? I am not responsible for what my mother did, and no worse for it surely!"

"The daughter of a murderess," he muttered.

"Whatever would people say!"

"Why need anybody know?" she asked. "It can be a secret between ourselves."

"People always worm things out," he said.

"Women watch like cats to pick holes in each other. I shouldn't have a moment's peace; besides—no, it's impossible! You've deceived me. You've played a beastly low down trick on me, Alice, and I don't feel called upon to overlook it."

The girl sat bolt upright and silent in the hansom, gazing straight before her; she felt hard rather

than tremulous and pathetic. She had meant to support everything he chose to say meekly; but her mood after all was not meek. He was selfish, narrow, cowardly, and she despised him. He had not a word of pity for her, only of reproach, and she would have choked if she had attempted to beguile him.

"I was led to believe," continued George, with feebly vindictive passion, "that you belonged to decent people, and all that, or of course I shouldn't have wanted anything to do with you. A man in my position looks to marry suitably—well; his people and friends expect it of him. You know that I asked most particularly, when we were first acquainted, who your parents were."

"They were better born than yours, George."

A man of his stamp cannot quarrel in cold blood; he was working himself into a rage on purpose.

"Mine were respectable at any rate, and if you are going to throw my father's china shop in my face," he said, with unconscious humour and deep offence, "the sooner we wish each other good-bye the better! I can understand a girl in your position wanting to better herself, but I say again that I have been grossly taken in, and I'm quite justified in 'aving no more to do with you."

"Very well," she said. "It is as you like, of course."

"If I had been told at the very beginning," he said, "it would have saved me a good deal of unhappiness. I was very fond of you, Alice."

"Were you?" said the girl.

She laughed faintly, and he glared.

"Yes," he repeated, "I was very fond of you, and looking forward to be settled comfortably in a decent and respectable 'ome. You've deceived me, and aunt, and all the people in the house. I wonder you weren't ashamed to do it, seeming so open too. It was very artful. You are evidently not the girl I fancied you."

"If I had told you when you proposed, would you have married me?" she asked.

"Er—I don't know," he stammered. "I might have done so. . . . It isn't exactly a pleasant thing to think that one's wife's mother committed a murder! There may be a wax image of her in the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's "—he called it Twoswords—"for all I know! A nice thing for a fellow in my position to think of! In justice to myself, I couldn't, Alice. We've had a good time together, and I thought you were a deuced nice girl, but I really can't. One must draw the line somewhere."

She had been pulling off her glove while he spoke.

"Here is your ring back," she said.

"Oh!" He was going to say "Never mind,

keep it," in a burst of generous emotion, but checked himself. It had cost him fifteen pounds, and she had really treated him very badly. He took it sourly and put it in his waistcoat pocket. "Thanks."

An awkward pause followed.

"And I let you kiss me," she murmured.

He did not understand her at all. Of course he had kissed her; they had been engaged. He wished the drive was over. He could not leave her in the middle of it very well, and she made him uncomfortable, sitting beside him like a sphinx with her tight lips and stony eyes.

"You need not return the presents I've given you," he jerked out, at last.

"You are very generous."

"I don't know whether you are trying to be sarcastic," he replied. "If you are it's most unbecoming and unnecessary under the circumstances. I hope," he added, "that you won't take too much to heart anything I have said. It is natural, I think, that I should feel bitter."

"Need we talk about it any more?" she said, impatiently. "You don't consider me good enough to be your wife, and I am rather glad now the climax has come. We were not suited to each other. I doubt if we should have been happy in any case,"

"You didn't seem to have any qualms formerly.

I am afraid it is a case of sour grapes, my dear!"

She withered him with a glance, and the cab stopped.

- "Thank goodness!" she exclaimed. "Are you coming in?"
 - " No."
 - "Good-bye, then," she said, relieved.
 - "Good-bye," he said, sulkily.

They shook hands, and the girl got out, leaving him in his seat.

The cab drove off as she admitted herself with her latch-key. There was a light still burning in the dining-room, and Mrs. Wilson came out. She was in a crude mauve silk blouse, which she wore for dinner, with plenty of fluttering ribbons about it, and gold buttons, some of which were missing.

- "Where's George?"
- "He wouldn't come in."
- "I thought he would have 'ad a bit of supper," said Mrs. Wilson. "There's some cold steak-pie, and baked custard, if you'd like it."
- "I am not hungry, thanks," said Alice. "I am tired. I shall go straight to bed."
 - "Did you enjoy yourself?"
 - "Not particularly. Good-night."

Mrs. Wilson's good-humoured laugh followed the girl up-stairs.

"I believe you and George have been having a tiff," she said. "What silly creatures lovers are!"

Alice went to her room, and began to undress. There was a pathetic suggestion of poverty in the flickering candle-light. She was a well-formed girl, but much too thin. All her life she had fretted and fevered her soul almost out of its envelope of flesh. She hugged herself in her arms, and looked at the saucers in her shoulder-blades, and at her hollow eyes.

Yes, the brief episode of her engagement had ended just as she had anticipated, only that he had been even more vulgar and unkind. When George Wilson became excited he lost command over his aspirates, which were not hereditary; he had distinctly said "'aving," and "'ome," and the Cockney intonation which irritated her had never been more marked. Nothing else could have helped to steady her nerves so successfully. His vulgarity, emphasized by emotion, had robbed her sordid tragedy of half its bitterness. It had helped her to realize, as even she had never done before, how far apart they were in spirit, and how insufferable even the "comfortable 'ome" he had alluded to might become when shared with him.

She was glad that she had not cried. She would have despised herself for ever if she had stooped to beg of that worm. And it was not likely that

she would have gained anything by it. She had little of the witchery of the happy woman. Selfdistrust, morbid self-consciousness, were ingrained in her. It was only under the sun of George Wilson's admiration that she had been able to emerge from her reserve, and directly he frowned she had shrunk back again. The tears, the entreaties, which might have enabled some girls to keep him, were impossible to her. She had no faith in her own powers of fascination, although she did not underrate her worth. Anxious as she had always been to marry, she had never made the faintest advance to any man. George Wilson had taken the initiative entirely. If a millionaire, who was also a hero of romance, had been within her reach, she would not have stretched out a finger towards him. She was as mute and helpless, in certain respects, as though she were petrified.

The reflection of her sallow face in the glass, her great eyes, re-aroused her pity for herself. The storm which had shaken her that morning was threatening to return.

"It isn't sour grapes! I wouldn't take him now if he went on his knees to me!"

A hot tear rolled down her cheeks, and fell on the "honeycomb" cloth.

She brushed out her long black hair with a sweeping motion, and shook it about her shoulders. She

looked like an elf. The candle was spluttering. She had been extravagant with it last night, and Mrs. Wilson would not allow more than two a week.

When she had got into bed, she sat hunched up for a while under the covers, with her thin hands clasped round her knees.

"I suppose I shall never marry now," she thought. "It isn't likely that another man will fancy me. And I don't think that even for a home, I could stand a second George Wilson. I wonder what they'll say down-stairs about it? Of course I shall have to go. He is sure to tell his aunt all about it, and I am not going to be gaped at by these people."

It was the old business again. The shameful secret of her birth had hounded her down. She would have to take a room, and live on the twenty-five shillings Verschoyle gave her, until she could find another cheap boarding-house willing to take her in at half-price in return for her services. She was accustomed to all the shifts of shabby genteel poverty already. No girl of her age in London was more capable of getting enough to eat on a few shillings a week.

Fortunately she had been able to put by four pounds since she had been with Verschoyle, so that

was something to fall back upon. She had often found herself in a worse plight.

Gone were her dreams of comfort and independence. The precarious existence of a woman who cannot expect to earn more than enough for her immediate necessities, confronted her again. She began to cry a little by-and-by in the dark—miserably, not passionately. George Wilson had been better than nothing after all. He had made much of her, and given her some position in his own set, and she had had the restful consciousness of a settled future to look forward to.

It was a long time before she fell asleep, and whenever she woke during the night an oppression on her chest reminded her that something unpleasant had happened, and she moaned as she turned over and stretched her limbs.

In the morning she found herself looking even less attractive than usual. Her eyelids were heavy, and her complexion leaden.

"I might be fifty," she commented. "I wish I were. Then I shouldn't have so many years to look forward to."

She had intended to rise early, and pack before she went out, but she had overslept herself after her feverish night, and only finished dressing hurriedly as the gong sounded for breakfast.

The usual eggs and bacon and smoked haddock were on the usual grubby table-cloth; Mrs. Wilson was pouring out coffee and tea, and Miss Gribble, the eldest lady boarder, was adjusting her false teeth before she began her breakfast. Everything was the same, and yet it was strange to Alice Durand. She was going away; this was the last time she would see it; that made all the difference. She meant to come back to lunch, tell Mrs. Wilson, after she had packed, that her engagement to George was broken off, and that she wished to leave, settle her bill, and go at once. What a cackling there would be in the boarding-house! She could hear everything that Miss Gribble and Miss Belmont would have to say on the subject. It did not matter. She would never see any of these people again.

She was so sensitive about her parentage that there was always a certain relief to her in shaking off the trammels of familiarity, and going among total strangers. For a time, until she became intimate with her new associates, and the old burden of hypocrisy and reserve sank upon her shoulders again, she felt a sense of freedom which was almost exhilaration. While people were utter strangers to her, she did not feel called upon to tell them who she was; it was when they began to give her confidence for her own secrecy that the struggle began

between the natural honesty of her disposition and the agonizing shame of her birth. For this reason she always avoided contracting intimate friendships with other women. The affection of one of her own sex could not drag her out of her morbid isolation. She did not think that women ever cared for each other very much, and her own indifference, which she did not attempt to conceal, no doubt helped to confirm her in this view. There was nothing spontaneous and lovable about this girl, who had felt the stain of blood upon her brow since she was seven years old.

"Mr. Verschoyle is sure to ask me what George said," she thought, as she buttoned her shabby black jacket. "He won't be surprised. I wonder what he thought of me for breaking down and making such a fool of myself yesterday!"

She coloured once more in recalling the unusual emotion she had displayed. It made her shrink from meeting him again.

Chapter IV

HE novelist was awaiting her with a good deal of impatience, as a matter of fact. He had thought about her more during the last twenty-four hours than he had done during the three months that she had been with him, or than he would have done in three years under ordinary circumstances. She had become the heroine of his book; he had created her.

A great deal depended upon the news she brought him to-day. If George Wilson remained true to his plighted word, his whole rendering of a certain type would be proved incorrect, and he would find himself confronted by a disconcerting blank wall of fact at the very outset of his imaginary perspective.

"It is because life is full of inconsistencies," he muttered, "that the novelist so often fails. He takes a certain character which is a type, not an individual, and makes him act as he ought to act, as he would act if he were a machine. But all sorts of subtle influences and conditions play upon the real individual, and blow him about like a weather-

cock. I feel that I am' entirely wrong, and that George Wilson is staunch!"

When Alice came in-he had been listening for her ring as though he were her lover-a glance at the girl's languid face told him that his last supposition was incorrect.

"Well?" he asked, eagerly. "Have you seen your lover?"

"Yes. You were quite right. The engagement is broken off."

" Ah!"

He tried hard to conceal his satisfaction as she went to the writing-table. Her voice was flat, toneless, he noticed, and she seemed to have no intention of telling him any more. She removed the top sheet of the blotting-pad, which was worn out, rearranged her sheets of foolscap in readiness for his dictation, and took up her pen. Yesterday might have been a dream. It was difficult to believe that she was capable of ordinary emotion, much less the passion she had displayed.

Verschoyle walked to the fire-place, and poked the fire to make time for himself. He glanced at the long, low glass, framed in beaten copper, which adorned the mantelpiece, and found her waiting for him, still apathetic as a machine in the writing chair. He could not stand it; he was devoured by curi-

osity.

"How did he do it?" he asked, abruptly.

"As you expected," she replied. "You seem to know him as well as though you were acquainted. He was very indignant that it had been kept from him; he felt that he had been taken in, and declined to have anything more to do with me. He pretended at first that it was only because I had deceived him about it so long that he cared, but he admitted afterwards that he couldn't have married me anyhow. He had his position to consider, and one had to draw the line somewhere."

The novelist, who had dropped into a chair, closed his eyes involuntarily, with a luxurious feeling of self-satisfaction. The girl scribbled on the blotting-pad; she drew ugly faces, and gibbets and skeletons hanging on them. Her abstractions never led her pen to flowers, and things of beauty.

Verschoyle broke the silence again.

"Do you feel bad about it?"

"I don't think so. I never disliked him so much. He was such a—a cad," she said. "I noticed his accent, and phraseology, and his whole tone, and comforted myself."

"You are fastidious, eh?"

"Yes, but it doesn't pay. Of course I should have been glad enough to get him; I'm not giving myself airs. He is as good as any one I shall ever get."

"But you didn't, in your heart, consider him good enough, did you?"

"No . . . I never expect to get what I want; how can I, in my position? I don't get a chance of mixing, on terms of equality, with gentlemen. As a matter of fact, I don't suppose one woman in a hundred in any station of life is really satisfied with the man she marries. If she is foolish, or proud, she tries to think she is—or to persuade other people that she is; her vanity demands it. I don't believe in love matches. The man wants the woman, and the woman, in nine cases out of ten, accepts the man because she wants to get married, and nobody else has asked her."

"You are a bitter philosopher for your age," he said.

"I have cause to be," she replied. "I am afraid I am wasting your time, Mr. Verschoyle."

"No," he said, "I like to hear you talk. It is so rarely that a girl, or even a woman, will discuss these subjects with a man."

But her brief animation was over. Her lips snapped again, and once more she sat, pen in hand, waiting for him.

He dictated half-a-dozen letters, and a short story which he had promised to a magazine. She was as careful and attentive as usual throughout the morning. If she had not expanded yesterday, he would

have been unable to discern that there was anything special upon her mind to-day. She was a curious study. That rigid self-command, those wild, fitful sparks of passion which lighted her eyes at rare moments, stimulated the novelist's thirst for better knowledge of this daughter of a blood-stained love. He had never looked at her before with any consciousness; he watched her now with the closeness of an absorbing interest, and could scarcely remove his gaze from her face. Once their eyes met, and a faint colour came into her cheeks. She was a girl after all; he had been rather brutal.

"Where do you live?" he asked her brusquely, when the morning's work was over, and she rose to go.

She stared at him in surprise. The interest in her that he had begun to display troubled and embarrassed her. She was not used to being considered interesting by a man who did not leer or squeeze her hand. Her reply was unwilling.

"I am living at Notting Hill at present, but I am about to move."

"Is there anything I can do for you?" asked Verschoyle, rather bluntly for a man of tact. "Do you want any money?"

Her face flamed. She turned away hastily.

"No, thank you, Mr. Verschoyle."

"All right. I didn't mean to offend you," he said.

When she was gone, he frowned and pulled his moustache.

"A girl of her class is always so suspicious, if she is straight. What motive did she imagine that I had beyond pure kindness? Have I ever taken the least notice of her before? She is very straight though—and with some ideas in her head."

Chapter V

A LICE carried out the programme she had arranged. She packed all her things and was quite ready to go before she said a word to Mrs. Wilson about it, and then had it all out with that lady in her own particular back room.

Mrs. Wilson was highly indignant.

"Your quarrels with George Wilson have nothing to do with me," she said, "and you can't go till I've found somebody else. I'm not anxious to keep you against your will, don't think it, but I'm not going to 'ave the house upset any more just as a new cook's coming in, and all. It won't poison you to stay till the end of the week."

"I can't," said the girl, obstinately. "I've ar-

ranged to go now, and must go."

"You are an ungrateful hussy, Alice Durand, and I am sorry I ever 'ad anything to do with you. George is well rid of a bad bargain."

Alice called a cab herself, helped the cabman to drag down her boxes, and drove to Charing Cross Station, where she deposited her things while she went to look for a room.

She knew London, and the cheap localities, and by five o'clock was installed in a bleak, barren little bedroom in the roof of a house near Russell Square. It was rather expensive, because it was a decent house, and the landlady was willing to get her breakfast and supper, providing she had her dinner out. The dinner would often consist of a cup of cocoa and a bun, no doubt, but perhaps she would soon be able to find another boarding-house.

The next day was Saturday, and she had a holiday on Saturday; Verschoyle usually went away for week-ends. She employed it in going to the agents and answering advertisements. She did not find exactly what she wanted; but somebody offered her a place as governess-companion in Siam. To accept it would mean to leave England for years, perhaps for ever, but there was nothing to keep her at home. She had no relations, no friends; an unhappy past to look back upon, a hopeless future staring her in the face. As usual, she regarded the proposal practically. English women would be rare and thought much of in a country like Siam. Anything was better than the sordid, struggling existence which was all she could expect here. She might marry there. The wages offered were good, too. She would be able to save money, which would be a great consideration if no matrimonial prospects appeared.

She asked for leave to think it over till Monday, but had already almost made up her mind to accept.

Sunday in London is never a particularly cheerful day. Alice, accustomed to the "life" of the Notting Hill boarding-house, found it even more dreary than usual. Last Sunday she had had a substantial dinner at any rate, and George Wilson had come to take her for a walk, and they had gone as far as Oxford Street, and had tea at the Vienna Café, and ridden home outside an omnibus. His conversation, it is true, had not entertained her; but she had felt in the world, part of it; other girls with their young men had adorned the streets, and she had been one of them. To-day she was deserted. Nobody cared about her. She had not even a book to read, although it was questionable whether she would have read it if she had. The intense dreariness of the Sabbath in a lodging-house bedroom weighed her spirits, always near zero, to the dust. The handful of red coals half lost in a desert of ashes at the bottom of the grate, the dirty muslin window curtains framing a perspective of London chimney-pots and leaden sky, the silence which reigned among the roof tops, completed her misery. When a drizzling rain began to fall, the girl huddled herself in the greasy arm-chair and cried.

"Oh, I shall go to Siam," she said. "I can't bear it."

It seemed rather a reckless thing to go to the other end of the world to live with people she had never seen—a friend was engaging her; but she felt inclined to be reckless: anything was better than London in poverty, friendlessness and mid-winter.

"What does it matter what becomes of me?" she asked herself. "If I can't remain with them, and am obliged to give notice before the stipulated three years are up, I shan't be worse off than I am here. There will always be a river handy."

Her black eyes glowed fiercely through the tears. She began to think, presently, about Mr. Verschoyle and his new book: chiefly about him. Probably he was at the seaside to-day, where the sun was shining, comfortably ensconced in the Grand Hotel; or perhaps he had gone to visit some of his friends, who all seemed to possess carriages and country seats. People who could buy everything they wanted for themselves always knew plenty of other people anxious to give them everything for nothing. This was one of the truisms of life which made Alice, who, having nothing, received nothing, very bitter. She bore Verschoyle no malice, however. He was a clever man, of whom she stood a little in awe, not more on account of his intellect than of that air of culture and good breeding which made her realize her own deficiencies so painfully. He had been kind to her the other

day, too, over that coincidence of the book. She hoped he would find another secretary who would take as much interest in his work.

She thought she would make her own tea this afternoon. The singing of a tin kettle on the hot embers would suggest an atmosphere of homeliness and comfort which did not exist; with a little trouble, too, it might be possible to brown a slice of toast.

Her economy was painful. She measured the tea out of the caddy with the greatest care. If she had felt rich yesterday, she would have bought herself a sweet cake of some kind as she used to do when she was in lodgings formerly, but a fit of hoarding, the offspring of terror, was on her, and she was afraid to spend a penny more than was necessary. The delicacy of her own face in the glass had accentuated her usual fear of illness; she was wiry despite the slightness of her build; but this affair with George Wilson had upset her, and she remembered how easy it was to "take something" when one was run down.

"Yes, I will go to Siam," she said again.

She went to bed at eight o'clock, because there was nothing else to do, and she was cold and miserable.

Verschoyle's study, the next morning, looked insultingly luxurious. It was empty, and as she stood

on the hearthrug waiting for him, she wondered what he intended his heroine to do after her lover gave her up; would she go to Siam also, or would she remain in London, a prey to poverty, loneliness and despair?

"I suppose he has never seen a bedroom like mine," she thought. "In the interests of art, I ought to give him a description of it, and of my battered tea-kettle, and the hole in my slippers, and the cracked looking-glass. Does he know what it is really like to live on a guinea a week in London?" she wondered, with a flicker of passion. "He writes and imagines, but he can't know. He has never felt it. He has always been rich."

When chance brought Verschoyle in a moment later, she hated him for the architype of her antithesis—prosperity and ease. He moved across his own Persian carpet as though the world belonged to him. His well-cut clothes, and white cuffs and hands, his smooth hair, the poise and turn of his head, all irritated her. How dared he write about poverty, and what a woman of her class felt! The oceans of all the universe rolled between them. He could no more put himself in her place than she could put herself in his.

He was very handsome.

The girl's gaze drooped. There was a sullen thumping in her breast, as though her heart were

resenting the unseen authority which bade it beat. Why was she made to live when she had nothing at all, and there was so much that she wanted?

"Good-morning," she said hastily, in response to his greeting. "Mr. Verschoyle, will you please to find another secretary? I wish to leave at the end of the week."

"Oh! how's that? Aren't you satisfied?"

"Quite, thank you," she replied. "But I am going to Siam."

"You are going to Siam!"

"To live with a family as governess-companion," said Alice.

Verschoyle sank into the arm-chair on the hearthrug, and looked at her.

"Siam," he said, slowly, "is a long way off. What is the idea? Have you any reason to suppose you will like it when you get there?"

"N—no. Anything must be better than London." A liquid note entered her voice, and her fingers interlaced nervously. "I am so tired of London," she said.

"Who are the people you are going with? Do you know anything about them? Are they in London now?"

"No, I have seen a friend."

"A man or a woman?"

"A man-a merchant in the city. He offered

first-rate references. I think they must be people in a good position and well known."

"Are they to pay your passage out?"

"Yes. I could not pay it myself. I have to sign an agreement to remain there three years. If I wish to leave at the end of the three years, or if they give me notice at any time, they are obliged to send me home, but not otherwise."

"But suppose you don't like them?"

"I should have to put up with it. Of course people can't be expected to pay my expenses out, unless I undertake to stay with them some time."

"It's rash," he said. "You may be very miserable. I don't believe in girls going abroad, especially to semi-civilized countries, to take situations except with personal friends or through mutual recommendations. It may sound all right on this side, but you don't know what you may be going to. Take my advice and stay at home."

"I have no home."

"You are used to London," he replied, impatiently. "It seems to me that you are better off here than you would be elsewhere."

"It's the worst place possible to be poor in," she said. "I've had to leave my boarding-house on account of George Wilson, and I'm living in one room in a lodging-house. It's sickening. I must have a change."

"Even if it be for the worse?"

"Yes," said the girl, with an obstinate indrawing of her lips. "I dare say I shall get on well enough in Siam. I'll risk it anyhow. If I come to grief, what does it matter? Nobody cares."

"I think you are foolish," said Verschoyle. "However—you know your own business best."

He set to work, and she sank into the automatic register of his words once more.

It was her own life, herself, that he was portraying; she knew that well enough; the fruit of each of their conversations, and all she had told him, was ruthlessly utilized. Either it did not occur to him, absorbed as he was in the artistic value of his subject, that there was anything brutal in thus making her the instrument of her own dissection, or else he did not care; and the passiveness of a spirit trained to obedience in the hard school of poverty, kept her pen moving with mechanical speed. But a germ of resentment was beginning to swell in her breast. She was alive, and he was gazing at her through a microscope, even unto her very soul. Her flesh crept as though she were naked under his eyes; he described her scene with George Wilson, and her nostrils contracted and she breathed through her teeth. When he gave her own reflections afterwards, renewed wonder at his insight, and shame, brought the blood to her cheeks: he might

almost have been in her room to see her alternate anger and tears.

She put her pen down. It was too painful to be borne. Her heart was beating painfully; her lips were trembling.

"Are you tired?" asked Verschoyle, abruptly, stopping in his usual perambulations.

Habit was stronger than resentment; she had had so many causes for complaint in her lifetime that necessity had forced her to conceal. It was true that she was about to leave, but she feared to offend him still.

She stretched her hand as though she had had the cramp, shook her head silently, and took up the pen again.

Verschoyle continued. Hers was the central figure of his book; nevertheless he was not thinking about her in a personal sort of way. Photography is not art; he had to choose his matter, to eliminate, to touch up a situation or an emotion when it lacked poignancy or the restraint which is sometimes the difference between tragedy and melodrama.

The whole morning was a torture to her. Endowed by nature and circumstances with more than usual sensitiveness, she flinched at every phrase which struck home. She, who had been so reserved, so secretive all her life, saw her thoughts and inmost emotions written down for the world to read.

That the world would not know her name was no comfort. He knew. She was glad she was going to Siam; she was glad she would never see him again when this week was over. She even wondered how she had dared to face him, after telling him so much. He had seemed sympathetic at the time; she had liked him better than before; she was beginning to hate him now. He showed so plainly that he cared no more about her than that she was useful to him. Her sense of aloofness from every other human being was increased by his artistic egotism. A wild animal which understood that it was being kept in captivity for the populace to stare at, might feel as she felt. Her mute anger grew till she thought she must choke.

Nobody cared for her, nobody protected her, nobody studied her. She was only supposed to have "feelings" when they were useful; otherwise she was to be a machine worked by the lever of twentyfive shillings a week.

The clock struck one. Verschoyle's flow of narrative was abruptly checked by the secretary, who rose at once. Usually she did not think of moving till he dismissed her, but desperation made her defiant.

Verschoyle, who had lost himself for some hours in composition, came to the surface with a sharp glance at the girl.

"I suppose I shall have to look for another secretary if you persist in going to Siam."

"Yes," said Alice, indifferently.

"I'll raise you to thirty-five shillings a week if you'll stay. You suit me."

It was a princely offer. She was not tempted in the least, however; she was wounded and insulted, and still more wounded because he did not know it.

"No, thank you," she said, sullenly, her face averted, as she tidied the table with her usual precision. "I don't care to remain in London."

"You'll regret it."

"Perhaps. Good-morning, Mr. Verschoyle."

"Oh, good-morning," he said, openly annoyed.

Chapter VI

LICE put on her things in the square hall of the flat, where a fire burned all day in extravagant luxury. Her lips were tightly compressed, her dark brows were drawn down. That she should have lived to refuse an offer of thirty-five shillings a week for a few hours' work a day! She might live comfortably on that, and save a little besides; thirty-five shillings a week presented to a girl in her position, a state of existence rising out of the Slough of Despond, as represented by a lodging and enough to eat as long as nothing happened, into one of comparative affluence. She was glad that she had refused, all the same. It was not for her services that he had asked her to stay; he could get secretaries by the thousand for a guinea a week; he wanted the model to his hand.

The girl stuck the pin in her hat viciously, and went down-stairs putting on her gloves. She had a mind to send word to-morrow that she was ill, and not come back again. Every day he would embarrass her more. Only he would not pay her if

she stayed away, and she did not want to break into her four pounds for board and lodging; it was all she had for her outfit for Siam. As it was she would land with nothing in her purse in a strange country among strange people, and conditions which she might find insufferable. Verschoyle's warning, although prejudiced by self-interest, no doubt, recurred to her with a sickly pang. She might find it impossible to remain twenty-four hours with her unknown employers, and then what would she do? She was certainly mad to refuse his offer. A girl with her living to earn had no right to proper pride; even yet she had not learned to cringe and efface herself enough.

Obstinacy was one of her most marked traits, and she had no intention of asking leave to change her mind. She was not going to make herself a convenience to him; what did she care about his book or him? He had never seemed to recognize that she was a human being with a sex until she had been startled into the betrayal of a secret which interested him.

She had a mutton pie and a cup of tea at a cheap shop for her lunch, and sat over it until it was time to keep an appointment she had made concerning the situation in Siam. The little tables were all crowded with clerks, and other shabby girls like herself, some with anxious faces, some with frivolous

faces, and bright colours in their hats; some whose faces expressed no more than ignorance, and a vacuous folly. They came in alone and in couples, and whenever the conversation could be overheard, it referred to something "he," generally without the aspirate had said, done, or was going to do. Occasionally a male acquaintance among the habitués was recognized with a giggle and a nod.

"They are all prettier than I am," thought Alice, "and gayer—yes, all of them. They manage to make the best of what they've got. I have no doubt that George Wilson would be much happier with one of these girls than he could have been with me, and they would all think him a most delightful person, I am sure. He made a mistake, and he has had a lucky escape."

But she would not have changed places with one of these young persons, though none of them could have such antecedents as hers. The girl whose heritage was infamy had to find within herself grounds for the self-respect without which her spirit would have succumbed. She would have liked to be supremely beautiful; as that could not be, she had cultivated her mind, in order to be able to look down on her usual associates from a higher mental plane. She had never worn cheap flowers and feathers in her hat, or bright silk blouses which were dirty; she never read penny novelettes and talked

about "him" and "fellers," with a giggle, in A.B.C. shops.

"My father was a gentleman, and my mother was a lady before she was a murderess," she was for ever reminding herself. "I am a lady too."

It was a fact that certain things came intuitively to her, and that she hankered passionately after the refined surroundings which were denied to her means. Verschoyle's flat, the atmosphere of it, the tone of the man himself, had appealed to her at first with an aching pleasure. It was her first contact with cultivation: she had been employed in city offices before. In some ways she would be sorry to go even now. There would be children to take care of in Siam, and she was not fond of children in general: most of them had disagreeable traits as far as she had seen; they were usually selfish, greedy and tiresome. The house would probably be furnished too with the primitive Philistinism rampant in the Colonies; and she loved beautiful objects of art and harmonious colours such as Verschoyle's home possessed; and she would be obliged to spend her spare time in plain needlework, mending and household duties, without interest, at the bidding of a woman who was probably a fool.

All the same she decided to go, only it was part of her morbid nature to look for the worst always.

She went to see the go-between, and signed her acceptance of the terms on the receipt of the first half-quarter's salary, unexpectedly offered to her in advance.

She was to have forty pounds a year, which was good pay considering that everything but clothes would be found for her, and she was only qualified to teach young children.

It was done now; she could not turn back if she wished. She was to sail next Tuesday; her ticket would be delivered to her before she went on board. Her farewells would not take long; she did not mean to say good-bye to anybody; there was no one for whom she cared enough.

Her lips set tighter than ever when she thought about her loneliness, and a fierce sadness lurked in her black eyes. She hated the world which neglected her; she steeled her heart and refused to feel the least regret at leaving the land of her birth. She had no country; she had become an Ishmaelite, without knowing the significance of the word, as the black flag had announced her mother's execution to the child of seven years old.

She was sewing by the light of the lamp in her bedroom that evening when the maid-of-all-work arrived panting at the door.

- "There's a gentleman to see you, miss."
- "A gentleman?" repeated Alice.

She thought of two people. Had George Wilson changed his mind and found her out; or had the man who had engaged her for his friend to-day, remembered something essential to say to her?

"Didn't he give a name?" she asked.

" No."

The general servant was already descending the stairs. Alice called after her.

"What have you done with him?"

"He's a-waitin' in the 'all."

"Oh, bother!" muttered the girl. "Stop a moment, Annie. Aren't the dining-room people out?"

"I dun'no."

"Well, find out," said Alice, sharply; "and if they are, show him in there. Mrs. Baker won't mind. He can't come up here."

She tidied her hair hurriedly, picked the loose threads from her dress, and followed the servant down-stairs.

"I don't see that the Siam man can have anything to say to me," she mused, "unless he wants to back out."

Her heart beat a little. She had been thinking about Siam; it would upset all her calculations if she were not to go after all.

Evidently the dining-room lodgers—who were members of the theatrical profession—were out, for no one was waiting in the hall. Alice pushed open

the dining-room door, which was ajar, and found Mr. Verschoyle standing on the hearthrug.

She was so surprised that she stared at him speechlessly. He was the last person she had expected to see.

He in return regarded her without speaking for a moment, and it was the girl who was the first to break the silence.

"Oh, good-evening, Mr. Verschoyle," she said, hurriedly, "do you want me to do some work for you?"

"Not exactly," he replied, with unusual hesitation. "You wouldn't stay this morning when I asked you. Will you marry me?"

"Marry you!" exclaimed Alice.

She could not believe that she had heard aright. Her lips parted, her eyes rested on his face with anxious attention.

"Yes, I don't want you to go away," he said.

He did not make any protestations of devotion; no offer of marriage could have been more baldly framed. It was not his nature to deceive her. He wanted her to stay. She understood that the whole of his motive was contained in that plain statement of fact. He was not in love with her; there was not a particle of passion in his voice or face; it was a purely intellectual interest that she had roused in him; a sort of curiosity, a keen desire to know, as

only marriage could enable him to know, the girl whose portrait he wanted for his book. The "human document" which was so valuable to him, was to be well bound and preserved for reference.

She had always disdained the sentiment circumstances forbade her to encourage; she had laid down, as her theory of life, that she must never be foolish enough to refuse any honest means of providing for herself, however distasteful the means might be. It was in that mood that she had watched George Wilson's "intentions" develop, and had accepted him in the end.

Nevertheless she coloured now from throat to brow.

"I'll stay for nothing!" she said, impulsively.
"I'll take the thirty-five shillings a week you offered
me. That is quite enough."

"That is very generous of you," said Verschoyle, with a half smile, "and I am deeply appreciative, believe me. But I had much rather you accepted my offer. You need not imagine that it is the unconsidered fruit of your determination to go to Siam. I have been thinking about it since you told me that Mr. George Wilson had retired; it was even in my mind, a mere germ, when I advised you to tell him about your mother."

"You offered me a higher salary this morning," she said, jerkily argumentative.

"I was making time for myself, that was all. Man is a procrastinating animal. You must pardon my delay."

The girl's fingers interlaced nervously; she looked defiant.

"I should be a fool! I suppose you know your own mind about it, although I shouldn't dream of it if I were in your place."

He regarded her with unveiled amusement.

"You are a strange girl. I never met one with such an outspoken contempt for herself."

"There you are wrong!" she retorted. "I don't despise myself. But I know I have none of the qualities which please people."

"Can't you imagine that you might be more attractive to a man than you think?"

"No, you know I'm not!"

"George Wilson found you so, it seems."

"George Wilson!"

"Well, he was a man of a sort."

"You know I'm not attractive," she said, with a gasp. "What is the use of pretending! When your book is done, and you've got just as interested in another. you'll wonder how on earth you could have made such a sacrifice for it. But that's not my business. You are a man; you can take care

of yourself, I suppose; and I'd rather be your wife than go to Siam or work for my living in London."

A sob which had been smothered in her throat got the upper hand. She turned away, and hid her face on the corner of the mantelpiece.

Verschoyle was silent for a moment; he followed the girl and stood beside her.

"I shall get another secretary, of course," he said. "I fancy I was unkind this morning; I didn't mean it. It was thoughtlessness, not callousness."
"Yes."

He laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Then it is a bargain, eh?"

She nodded, and raised her face, which bore traces of tears.

"When shall we be married? I could go away conveniently at the end of next week. It does not seem to me that there is any use in a prolonged engagement. I'll get a licence. Could you be ready?"

"If you like. How shall I manage about Siam? I've signed an agreement, and received ten pounds

on account."

"What is the man's name, and where does he live?" asked Verschoyle. "I'll arrange that."

"There is the ten pounds," she said, methodically, producing her purse.

"Never mind," he said, "unless it is a cheque?"

"It is a note."

"Keep it; I will give you some more in the morning. You will want clothes, no doubt. Are you comfortable in these lodgings?"

"This room isn't mine," she said. "I've only got a bedroom at the top of the house?"

"Isn't there a sitting-room you could have?"

"No. Both this and the drawing-room are let. It doesn't matter. I shall be out a great deal getting my things, and I've put up with worse for longer than a week or two."

"You waif of the city!" he said, looking at her under his lids with a pity which was almost tenderness. "Some girls of your age have scarcely been out alone; and you—I suppose there is no shift you have not been put to, no narrow place that you have not been obliged to wriggle out of alone!"

The girl's hand clenched; her bosom swelled; her eyes widened with pride and passion too.

"I've had to protect myself for five years," she said. "They seem fifty. I am an old woman in some ways. I wonder you are not afraid to trust me!"

"A man in his right senses should be able to rely on his own judgment in certain respects," he replied. "Will you come to-morrow as usual? I shall not be able to see you otherwise, as I cannot visit you here. You shall not work upon the book."

"I don't mind," she said, bravely. "I'm quite willing to oblige you till you get somebody else."

The primness of her sacrifice made him smile.

"No, I know you do mind. I can make my own notes until we return from our honeymoon, and the new secretary arrives."

The slate clock on the mantelpiece struck ten. Verschoyle took up his hat.

"Well, I shall see you in the morning, Alice?"

"Yes," said the girl. "Thank you."

There was a strained pause. He bent his head and kissed her.

"You must try to be happy," he said, in a low tone. "I mean you—I want you to be happy."

She was surprised to find that he was regarding her with an expression she had never seen in his eyes before. She could not imagine at this moment why she had considered his face hard. Her heart beat, her lips trembled, the kiss left a burning memory on her cheek.

"You are very kind," she faltered. "I am ever so much obliged to you—although I am sure you are making a mistake!"

She went to the front door with him.

"Go in out of the cold," he said, with the authority of possession.

The command convinced her that they were really engaged.

Chapter VII

A LICE returned to the dining-room, and turned the gas out with mechanical economy, before mounting to her own room.

She was engaged to be married to Anthony Verschoyle. She had to repeat this to herself many times, because it seemed too incredible to be true. If she had been beautiful and fascinating she could have understood that a man in his position might be tempted to contract an unequal marriage, but he was not in love with her; she knew that as well as she knew that she was not in love with him.

Her sensation at the moment, indeed, was more one of awe than of anything else. She was so surprised that she could not feel elated. It was necessary to enumerate to herself all the benefits which would accrue to her by this marriage in order to make her realize her wonderful good fortune. To begin with, she would be raised in a day to a position of ease and independence. She would never have to work for her living any more; she would never be snubbed by employers, or obliged to dance

attendance on the tyrants of employment agencies. She would be Mrs. Anthony Verschoyle, the mistress of the artistic home which had filled her with such envy of its possessor. Her life in future would be passed in an atmosphere of culture, and the society of a refined and talented gentleman.

"What a change he will be after George Wilson!" she thought.

It was typical of her respectful regard for Verschoyle that, although she knew he was not in love with her, she had no fear that he would neglect her. He had said that he wished her to be happy, and of course he would show her every consideration. He would be a husband to be proud of. It would be agreeable to be with him when the strangeness of their new relationship wore off.

She began to flush with the excitement of the sudden and most marvellous change in her prospects. Her arms embracing her knees, the girl sat over the fire like a witch, her eyes glowing, the colour in her cheeks deepening with the progress of her thoughts.

It was long past eleven before she remembered to go to bed, and then she could not sleep. If she had been asked this morning to foretell her future, she would have guessed anything sooner than that Anthony Verschoyle would propose to her.

"It is too good to be true." she repeated to her-

self, with ingrained pessimism. "He will change his mind before the wedding."

She had never expected a genuine love affair, so she was perfectly satisfied with Verschoyle. No marriage of convenience could have possessed more agreeable attributes. The man himself, his position, his environment, all appealed to the native fastidiousness of her nature. There would be nothing coarse to make her feel that she was paying dearly for her position. If she had married George Wilson she would have hated him often; he would have kept her in a fever of self-assertion, protest, argument, disgust. Verschoyle's companionship could not blunt the refinement or the intelligence of any woman, nor would he seek to stamp his individuality upon her as the man of lower type would do. She would be free with him; her soul and mind could expand. She might be herself without any cramping conditions or penalties.

And if he had not begun this book, he would have known nothing of her history, and would certainly never have asked her to marry him. Such a coincidence amounted to an intention on the part of destiny. They must be made for each other; she must have been meant throughout to be luckier than she supposed. The chain of circumstances had linked themselves so curiously in her favour, that

she had no right to dread that anything would happen to disappoint her now.

What tears she had wasted over George Wilson! His meanness was the first blessing which had come to her in disguise. The lesson ought to be a valuable one to her, but still she was weighted with anxiety, and knew that she would not feel secure until the marriage was accomplished.

So many things might happen. If he spoke of his intention to friends, he might be persuaded to forego it; he might lose interest in her—she held him by such a slender thread; he might fall ill and die.

She shuddered as though she loved him, and closed her eyes, and wished for morning. Her night visions were always ugly. The girl's dormant vitality, which the sun warmed to a little life, reached its ebb in those silent hours peopled for years with the tragic spectres of her childhood. Poverty and loneliness had stalked as grimly through her nights. She could not put away at once such deeply-burned impressions; she dare not rejoice too freely lest she rejoiced too soon. She had always been unlucky. A disappointment of this kind was the most likely thing to happen to her.

Morning found her in no livelier mood. She was sure that he had changed his mind already, and

could not touch her breakfast for a lump of nervous suspense in her throat. All the sordid details of her toilet were the same as yesterday; her pale face and black eyes looked as unattractive to her as ever. Nothing had changed since yesterday; why should she imagine that Mr. Verschoyle was going to marry her? She was intended for a dismal subordinate position.

All the way to Westminster in the omnibus she stared through people and things at a world of her own. She saw her mother and father, and herself as a child; she heard herself crying when the tragedy was complete; she felt the misery of her schooldays, and the convulsive throb of hope with which she had first encountered a beam of admiration from George Wilson's eyes. It was her nature to retain a more vivid recollection of the many unpleasant than of the few pleasant incidents of her life; even the gratification she had derived from Verschoyle's proposal was obliterated momentarily by an old anguish, and the mortifying memory of George Wilson's recoil.

Her 'bus deposited her not far from Verschoyle's door, and she walked on with beating heart. She would feel easier when they had met again, and his proposal had been ratified in the cool sanity of the morning.

Yesterday she had been his secretary, to-day she

was his fiancée; it was a curious feeling. She stepped into the lift in a dream, and waited afterwards, with a humming in her ears, for his servant to open the door. Her fancy detected an unusual respect in the man's manner; did he know? Of course he knew nothing at all; Verschoyle was not likely to discuss his private affairs with the butler.

She took off her things by the hall fire as usual, and in a moment a door opened, and Verschoyle came out of his study to greet her. That was unusual; he meant it then; she had not dreamed last night.

"Well, Alice?"

He smiled at her, and took her chilly hand. A rare awkwardness tied her tongue; she turned red and stammered, the girl who had lived alone in London for five years. A lover was different from an employer; she had never felt embarrassed with him before.

- "I was thinking all night," she said, "that you couldn't mean it after all."
 - "What an unbeliever you are!"
 - "It seems so funny," she said infelicitously.
- "At any rate I am an improvement on George Wilson, am I not?"
 - "Oh, of course," she said.

He laughed at the fervour of her reply, and a furious blush mantled her cheeks.

"Come in," he said. "Why are we standing out here? I am not going to work this morning. I am taking a holiday in honour of you. We will talk awhile."

"Are you sure you don't want me to do some work for you?" she asked, earnestly. "I should like to. I don't mind at all."

"If you really mean it, I have an article to get off my mind. But seriously I don't feel industrious this morning. Let me wheel this chair nearer the fire for you."

He shook up the down pillow in the big armchair, and brought a footstool for her feet. She hoped he did not notice how shabby her shoes were. It made her dizzy to be waited on by him. His manner towards her was quite different from usual. He had always been courteous to the secretary; but every inflection of his voice reminded her that now she was his promised wife.

They were to talk, so of course she had nothing whatever to say to him. He had tact enough, however, to break the ice. He asked her questions about her childhood and subsequent struggles, and the secret agonies of years came out with a rush. She told him everything. He was the first person she had ever been able to trust, and the relief of unburdening herself was great, although she guessed his motive in encouraging her confidence. His in-

terest might be purely intellectual, but it was interest. She knew that she might express herself freely and fully without boring him, and it was the nearest approach to sympathy that she had known. Perhaps she felt too, that he was entitled to every information concerning herself that she could give him. It was her memory that he was buying; the tacit contract between them demanded openness from her.

In return he told her exactly what his position was, and asked whether she would like to keep on in the flat or take a house. He had a thousand a year besides his considerable professional income.

"I should prefer to remain here," she said at once. "I love this flat. You have made it so beautiful."

"Very well. And where shall we go for the honeymoon?"

Her eyes sparkled.

"I have a great desire to go to Rome. But if you think it would be too far—"

"We will go to Rome," he said. "There is nothing to prevent me working a few hours a day while we are away. I must get you a ring, Alice. Would you like diamonds?"

"I shall like whatever you please to give me," said the girl.

He invited her to dine out with him that evening when it was time for her to go.

She was tempted by the idea of it. The lights, the music, the gaiety of a smart restaurant, looked more attractive than a cup of tea at home.

"But I am so shabby," she objected, wistfully. "You would be ashamed of me."

"Could you get something in time?"

"I might."

"I have fifty pounds here for you. Take it now. You shall have another fifty to-morrow."

Her hands shook as she took the notes: her lips were dry.

"Thank you very much. It doesn't seem right, though."

"Nonsense, my child. . . . I would ask you to stay to lunch with me, but it is better not, I suppose. I am expecting a friend too. Shall I call for you at seven?"

"I shall be ready," she murmured.

He put his hand on her shoulder and kissed her again.

"Have a good lunch. I feel as though I were turning you out. What a shame!"

It seemed to be his aim to make their brief engagement as normal as possible. His manner was frank and lively. He spoke of fetching her as though it would give him pleasure to take her out, and the familiarity of the caress had a natural air.

He hoped, indeed, that she would grow fond of

him. It would be interesting if she developed the same jealous tendencies as her mother. He no longer thought of love for himself; there had been an episode in his life which he would never forget. The girl would be a stimulating companion. He did not expect, and perhaps did not desire, more of any woman at this date.

Chapter VIII

A LICE slipped the notes in her bosom as she went down stairs. Her purse was not to be trusted. She had never possessed so much money in her life.

"Yes, I am really, really engaged," she told herself. "He is very nice about it. I am sure I shall like him. I don't suppose there are many such handsome and agreeable men in London. And he is actually going to marry me—Alice Durand!"

Fresh wonder seized her; she would never be tired of wondering at the marvellous good fortune which had happened at last to her unlucky self. But youth was not dead in her. She ordered an extravagant lunch at a restaurant which had always been above her means, and, being a girl, drank lemonade with it. She had felt "in it" when George Wilson had taken her out to tea on Sundays; how would she feel clothed in new and expensive clothes, and dining at a sumptuous restaurant with a handsome and celebrated man like Anthony Verschoyle? The prospect was so dazzling that it almost took her breath away. She abandoned herself to a lotos

dream of luxury. The materialism which is in most women's natures, which had received so little encouragement in hers, fed upon this first earnest of a new and brighter life.

The dinner with Verschoyle would be but the beginning. The brilliancy of the occasion would not be dimmed by the thought that she had nothing more to look forward to, entr'actes of uneasiness about to-morrow. She was not to be the Cinderella of a night; the clothes she bought with his money, would not vanish as the clock struck twelve.

She was only a young girl after all; and now that the numbed incredulity of the first surprise was over, her heart beat, and her cheeks glowed. Happiness was scarcely the word to be applied to her state; she was feverish with excitement, and the turmoil of her mind took away her appetite even for the best meal which she had had for months.

The afternoon was spent in shopping. Despite her haste she meant to get the value for her money. She purchased with good taste and discrimination hampered by inexperience, and a West End shop had altered a light silk gown to fit her, and sent her home an opera-cloak, gloves, and other necessaries in good time.

She was ready ten minutes before seven; it would have seemed to her an impertinence to keep him waiting. It was with a little trepidation that she

surveyed herself in her cracked looking-glass meanwhile; she was so unused to seeing herself in evening dress, that the result frightened more than it pleased her. She would have felt more at ease in her own well-worn blouse, which she had made herself. Perhaps she looked ridiculous, and he would feel uncomfortable at being seen with her.

If anyone had slighted her mental capacity, she would have been ready enough to defend herself; she was always diffident about her looks. She admired big fair women, with fine figures, masses of golden hair, and white skins. She had no "manner," and no appearance. She would have done far better, no doubt, to have bought herself something quieter.

It was in an agony of concealed nervousness that she went down when the up-stairs bell tinkled—the signal agreed upon between herself and Annie. She scarcely dared to face him. His voice reassured her.

"You look very nice, Alice."

"I am glad you think so," she replied, with a gasp of relief. "Of course I am not used to dressing," she added. "I have only been able to clothe myself. I shall improve with experience."

"No doubt," he said.

He was kind but indifferent; evidently the subject was not of great importance to him; and his tone would have reminded her, if she had needed remind-

ing, that it was not for her appearance that he was going to marry her. She was too pleased with her prospects, however, to be damped by such trifles. This ideal evening had already come.

The hansom was waiting for them. He helped her in.

"I have a couple of stalls for the St. James's in my pocket," he said, as they drove off. "I thought you would rather go to a theatre after dinner than home."

"Of course I would! I have never been to the theatre in the stalls in my life."

"Really!"

"George Wilson took me three times in the upper circle. When I paid for myself it would never run to more than the pit." Her voice sank to a whisper. "I have been in the gallery!"

"You must be fond of theatres!"

"I am. You see I've never had anything else," she said, a dreamy note in her voice. "I used to go and watch women in beautiful dresses—loving and hating and being loved. It was romance; it warmed me here where life had left me cold—frozen with cold. Between the acts, I envied the people in the stalls, that is true, and it was dreary going home afterwards." She checked herself with a sigh, followed by a swift smile. "But I shall be in the stalls myself to-night!"

"Yes," he said, "and you will be able to go to the theatre whenever you like. I have a play coming out in a few months. You shall have a box for the first night. I know plenty of theatrical people; they may amuse you."

He had been afraid for a few moments that she was going to be commonplace after all; her obvious excitement over little pleasures, her anxiety about her clothes, had been the sort of thing to be expected of any suburban miss. That note about romance and life had sounded different. He remarked once more her curious innate faculty of expression. She felt so much, and she could make him feel and see what she saw. Her passionate earnestness was magnetic.

"Did it ever occur to you," he asked, suddenly, to go upon the stage yourself,"

"No," she said, wondering. "Why?"

He did not tell her that she had the temperament of an actress, because he did not wish to put ideas into her head which would not please him.

"I thought," he said, "that there was a stagestruck period in every girl's career—as necessary as the measles!"

"I wrote poetry," she said, and blushed. "It was miserable poetry. I often cried over it. It's just a way of letting off steam, I suppose. A young man is spoken of as 'fast,' and a girl at the same

age, if she is a respectable girl, writes verses in her bedroom, and hides them, or sighs for the stage."

"I believe you could tell me a great deal about your own sex if you chose," he said, in a tone of interest.

"I suppose any woman could."

"Ah, but they don't," he said. "That's the thing. From the time the average girl puts her frocks down, and her hair up, her chief occupation is to appear to men as she is not. I should like to know—many things."

"You must know plenty of women older and more experienced than I am," she said, "who are better qualified to inform you."

"The respectable ones are not so intelligent—and so truthful, and the other kind won't do."

She blushed; it was the first compliment he had paid her. Then she blushed for another reason.

"Perhaps I talk too much! It is always the way when one is not used to talking at all."

"We will resume the conversation when we are married," he said, smiling. "Here we are."

The cab drew up at a restaurant, and he helped her out. The dream sensation came back again with the lights, the warmth, the bowing waiters.

Her confidences were spasmodic, and alternated with fits of reserve which held her almost speechless. When she once began to talk, she talked quickly,

eagerly, animatedly, and her black eyes flashed, and her voice possessed many notes. She was, as she said, unaccustomed to discussing herself and her thoughts with any one, and she had none of the cultivated hypocrisies of the society manner. If she spoke at all, she did not stop to consider what impression she was making; her language and opinions were sincere.

"It seems impossible," she said, "that I should be out with you!"

"There is a pledge of reality for you," he replied, and laid a diamond ring on the table beside her.

"My engagement ring," she murmured. "It is a far more beautiful one than George Wilson gave me."

He let her put it on herself, and she alluded calmly to her former engagement. There was no sentiment lost between them. But he was an attentive companion, interesting, and interested in her, watchful of her ways, her likes and dislikes, the inflection of her voice, her movements and mannerisms. He led her cleverly from one subject to another during the many courses of the dinner, to discover what she knew and what she cared about, and did not snub her opinions when they were young and crude. He was surprised indeed at her width of information, and the deep intelligence she displayed on many matters. She had evidently read a great deal, and

on lines unusual for a girl. She told him, in the course of conversation, that her father had been a man of brilliant qualities, who would have made a mark if he had lived.

"Yes, there is something in heredity," said Verschoyle, thinking aloud. "You might have been the ordinary tousled young person of uncertain aspirates and violent taste in dress—only it is so much more natural that you are not! In fact you are your parents' child."

"Yes," said the girl, "my father's—and my mother's child."

Her long lashes were lowered, her lips compressed. The clang of a prison bell had drowned the orchestra, a black flag had veiled the lights.

Verschoyle, who was regarding her curiously, roused her with a touch.

"Don't think about it here!"

George Wilson would have said: "What are you thinking about?" She appreciated the difference.

"I beg your pardon," she said, simply.

At the theatre afterwards, Verschoyle met a friend, and introduced Alice as his fiancée. On the way home she told him that she had never had such an enjoyable evening in her life. For the first time she returned his kiss, when they said good-night on the doorstep, and called him by his name.

She was happy and flushed. Even the dinginess

of the lodging-house could not damp her elation. She had tasted the fruits of wealth to-night, of wealth and position and sympathy. She liked Verschoyle. He could not have been nicer. She was very glad that she was going to marry him. It was such a delightful new experience to be able to refer to her parents without disguise. Nobody else had ever taken such an interest in her. Her few girl friends had always wanted to talk about themselves, not to listen to her; the habit of silence had come easy enough. She felt younger than she had felt for years; there was a buoyancy in her breast. She was no longer an outcast, a soul alone; he had taken her in out of the wilderness, and given her a home.

The days that followed were equally happy. She went every morning to Verschoyle as usual, and begged permission to write his letters, and perform other details of her old secretarial duties for him. As she was so busy getting her trousseau ready, she did not always stay long with him. He took her out to dinner several times, however, and their intercourse had become naturally familiar.

She wondered, on the eve of the marriage, what George Wilson and his aunt and all the people at the boarding-house would think if they knew that she was going to be married to-morrow, and to whom. She longed to go and tell them; the idea of the sensation she would create was very attractive.



"She had tasted the fruits of wealth to-night; of wealth, and position and sympathy."

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"But it would be rather vulgar, I suppose, to call," she mused. "It would look as though I wanted to brag—and as though I cared what these people thought of me. I'll wait till we return from the honeymoon."

She had arranged to meet Verschoyle at a certain quiet church at ten the next morning. His lawyer was to fetch her and give her away. Nobody else would be present.

Alice could not help feeling that something must happen still to prevent the ceremony taking place. The eventful morning dawned as other mornings, nevertheless, and no telegram came to warn her of a postponement.

At twenty minutes to ten Mr. Hamilcar made his appearance—an elderly man, in a frock coat, with a festive button-hole. He introduced himself to Alice, who was waiting, and complimented her upon the occasion. They drove to the church together, almost in silence; the girl was stricken dumb, and the lawyer was wondering what on earth had induced Anthony Verschoyle to marry his secretary.

At the door of the church Verschoyle met them. He pressed Alice's hand, and told her that the clergyman was ready. He had his usual self-possessed air, but seemed to know that her heart was fluttering, for he held her arm unceremoniously up the aisle.

The scene was so natural, and so unnatural; so

strange, and yet so strangely familiar, as though in a dream she had seen it all before. . . .

When it was over, Mr. Hamilcar and the clergyman shook their hands, and wished them luck in the vestry. Verschoyle kissed his wife.

The lawyer accompanied them to the door, where they shook hands once more and parted.

Mr. and Mrs. Verschoyle drove direct to Charing Cross. Verschoyle had timed the wedding in order to allow them to catch the Continental express. Their luggage had already been conveyed to the station and registered by Verschoyle's manservant, who was waiting to hand his master the receipt and the tickets.

There was no pause, and scarcely time to think till they were en route.

"We did that neatly," said Verschoyle. "I feel in a good temper, Alice, do you?"

"I am quite happy," said the girl, dreamily.

"Do you love me?" he asked, smiling.

"I like you very much," she responded, with colour in her cheeks.

If he were not in love himself, he was sufficiently attracted to rise to the occasion. It was a fact that she had grown upon him greatly during the intimacy of the engagement. They had the compartment to themselves, and he came over and sat beside her, and put his arm round her waist.

"It reminds me of George Wilson," she murmured.

"Damn George Wilson!" said Verschoyle, flushing.

It was the first time she had heard him swear.

Chapter IX

HEY spent a week in Paris, and then went on to Rome viâ Genoa. Alice was delighted with everything. The change, the novelty, the life of the great hotels, all new to her, the absence of responsibility, made her another girl.

The morbid thoughtfulness seemed to be ousted from her character by a zest and enthusiasm far more suited to her years. Her communicativeness was no longer spasmodic; she no longer shrank into her shell at a touch. She was surprisingly bright and naïve and appreciative—scarcely like the same girl who had been Verschoyle's secretary.

He was an admirable travelling companion, and her freshness and intelligence pleased him, no doubt. He showed her everything, and took her everywhere, although it was all old ground to him, enjoying himself the while as much, apparently, as she was enjoying herself.

"I think we are having a happy honeymoon, don't you?" he asked her when they had been married about five weeks.

"I am enjoying it immensely," she said.

"I wonder if I may take that as a compliment?" Tears rose to her eyes, and she put her hand on his arm.

"Indeed," she said, "I am sure I shouldn't be so happy with anybody else. I am grateful; you mustn't think I am not."

"It's all right, dear; I know."

He patted her hand affectionately before she removed it. They were not demonstrative as a rule; it was unnecessary under the circumstances; but no doubt they had grown fond of each other since their marriage.

As she strolled away from him among the groups of people in the hall, he overheard a brief conversation between two Frenchmen.

- "That's the best-looking woman in the place."
- "Chic, eh? French?"
- "No—American perhaps. She is married to the Englishman who sits at the table near you."
- "What eyes, mon Dieu! She is too young; she does not know how to use them. In a year or two—" The Frenchman blew a kiss at the air.

Verschoyle glanced round with masculine interest to see of whom they were talking. To his surprise he found them gazing after his wife.

It was a sensation which sent the blood to his head. These men spoke of her as though she were a beauty. They found her too attractive for an

Englishwoman; they discussed her points seriously, among a crowd of women of every nationality. Was it possible that she was really good-looking, or had she struck a peculiar taste? He had never considered her good-looking; he had not thought of her in that light at all.

When she turned towards him, he regarded her curiously. He was trying to see her with a stranger's eyes, and the result of his effort was a second surprise even greater than the first. Happiness had changed her in more ways than one. Her once sombre eyes were brilliant, her thin face had filled out to a perfect oval; her lips were no longer bloodless and contracted to a rigid line by suppressed animosity against the world; her whole expression had softened, her manner acquired an indefinable charm. In Paris she had learned how to do her hair, and becoming clothes called attention to the excellent lines and suppleness of her figure, which was still too thin.

Verschoyle remained staring at her as at an apparition. Had he never seen her before, or was it possible for a few weeks of marriage to change a girl so much? She must have changed, yet the foundation of her good looks had not attracted his attention. She was really a beautiful and graceful woman, and she was his wife.

He was naturally gratified, and the unwonted

warmth of his expression brought the colour to her face.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

He made room for her on the couch beside him, and lighted another cigarette.

"Nothing is the matter. You are looking well,

Alice. The trip has done you good."

"Yes, I feel very well. It is such a relief not to be bothered about anything." She laughed softly.

"I shall begin to get fat directly."

He smiled at her caressingly.

- "You could stand a little more flesh. Do you know what I overhead about you just now? A Frenchman said you were the prettiest woman in the hotel."
 - "Oh nonsense! He must be silly."
 - "I think so too."
 - "You are making fun of me!"
- "Vanity concerning your personal appearance was never one of your faults, eh?" He put his arm through hers and leaned back, watching her, their heads close together. "Yes, you have improved a great deal. Marriage and prosperity agree with you. I'd kiss you if we were alone."

"I am flattered," she said.

She was beginning to be a woman already. The strangeness was wearing off, with her first awe of

him. She saw to-night that he admired her, and her heart beat quicker with pleasure. They were very good friends.

When the tour they had planned was nearly over, he reminded her that he had not done a stroke of work since he had been away.

"It's your fault," he said. "You haven't given me a moment to myself. You are too young for me, that is a fact."

"I would have stayed at home willingly at any time," she replied in distress. "Why did you let me waste your time? Of course it is for you to say always."

"Yes, you are obedient," he said, touching her cheek. "I am not finding fault with you. I don't think I could pay you a higher compliment, my dear, than to admit that I have been too entertained by your society to wish to leave it even for a couple of hours."

"I am glad I haven't bored you," said the girl, gravely.

It was one of those moments when her old self revived, and a silence followed which he felt to be namelessly embarrassing.

"I think we shall get on just as well at home," he added. "You are sensible and reasonable. An unreasonable woman is the most irritating animal on the face of the earth!"

He did not add as he might have done: "And sometimes the most lovable." He spoke with the animus of personal experience, and frowned and laughed afterwards, in dismissing a memory which chance had aroused.

Alice was becoming accustomed to compliments from him, and this one did not prevent her wondering if he had ever been in love. Of course he must have had "affairs"; she had far too much knowledge of the world to imagine that she was the first woman in his life; and the information concerning her sex contained in his books-she had read them all while she was his secretary—was the keen, welltrained insight of a man of the world. Nevertheless it had not occurred to her to ask herself this particular question before, and it was characteristic of her intelligence that so slight a reference should set her groping in his past. It had nothing to do with her, of course; he had made no vows and protestations, though there could not be a kinder or more attentive husband.

They were at Capri, whence they were to commence their journey home. Verschoyle had bought a painting that day from a promising young artist, and they went out to join him, and watch him give the finishing touches to his picture. The strip of blue sea with the clear purple shadows, the picturesque houses, the group of lounging peasants, the fishing-

boats moored to the quay, would remind them of Italy when they were home in London.

After chatting awhile with their artist friend, they turned to walk back to their hotel. In one of the narrow stony ways they came suddenly upon a lady who was buying flowers.

She was speaking bad Italian with an English accent, and Verschoyle exclaimed as his eyes fell on her.

She raised her face at that moment, and he saw it in full as he passed.

"Is it some one you know, Anthony?" asked Alice.

"No. I thought I knew her," he said. "The hair and figure reminded me of—an old friend."

"Of course you must have lots of friends I don't know," she said.

"Of course," he answered, absently.

He kicked a loose stone out of his way, and walked on without noticing that she had stopped to look at a window full of coral and tortoise-shell. She followed him presently.

"Wait for me! You've forgotten me, Anthony!"

"No, I haven't forgotten you," he answered, looking up and smiling. "We haven't bought your tortoiseshell brushes and combs yet, have we? We'll come out and get them after lunch. It's time to go in now."

He took her hand, and they went on side by side. But his thoughtfulness and momentary neglect had reminded her of the question which had flashed into her mind this morning. Had he ever been seriously in love, and had a red-haired woman with a fine full figure had anything to do with his impatience at unreasonableness in her sex?

Chapter X

A LICE found the journey home even pleasanter than the setting out. She was used to being Mrs. Anthony Verschoyle, and the excitement of her bridal days had quieted down into peaceful happiness. She looked forward with delight to returning to the Victoria Street flat, which was already so familiar to her. It would be a treat to have such a beautiful home of her own, and to see London from the new standpoint. There would be the pleasure, too, of distributing the treasures they had bought in Italy; and of meeting her husband's friends.

When they arrived, it was peculiar and gratifying to remember in what a different capacity she used formerly to enter his doors, and to recall the old hopeless depression made the present taste sweeter in her mouth. There was the square hall where she used to take off her things, the study, and reception rooms. The large bedroom which she now entered for the first time, and the dressing-room beyond had been refurnished. She saw at once that everything was new.

"You are good, Anthony," she said. "It's lovely."

It was late afternoon—they had stopped in Paris en route—and a glow of well-being and content filled her veins as she presided over the tea-table from her arm-chair, and looked about her. They conversed, with the fluent ease of intimacy and mutual interests, about their new acquisitions, and certain improvements they had planned for their home. It was not until they had gone in to look at the study together, and she found herself before the familiar writing-table, that the animation was arrested on her face.

"You'll have to go on with your book now, won't you?" she asked, gravely.

"Yes," he answered. "I shall be interviewing secretaries to-morrow morning. I hope I may find one as satisfactory as you were!"

"Are you sure you wouldn't like me to help you, Anthony?" she said in a low tone. "It would make me proud and glad to think I was of use."

"You are of use to me," he said, gently, "in another way. There, we need not talk about that! My wife has other duties and occupations to fill her time. I said from the beginning you should not be my secretary, but I appreciate your kind interest in my work, my dear."

She admitted to herself, if not to him, that she

was greatly relieved by his refusal of her offer, although she had felt impelled, for some cause, to make it. While they were away, it had been easy to forget why he had married her; his good-feeling and good-breeding had never let her feel neglected or unloved. Now that they were home, and the literary atmosphere enveloped him once more, and once more his art became the paramount object of his life, everything reminded her to what she owed her present state. Here she had written day after day at his dictation; here she had told him her tragic story. Her tears were fresh upon her cheeks still; the sympathy of his voice lived again.

If he had yielded to her weak offer to go on with her old duties, she would surely have felt a recurrence of the dislike he had begun to inspire in her before their marriage. As it was, she was able to put aside the burden of the past, and give herself over to the enjoyment of the present. What did it matter to her that she was his model, if he were consistently kind and affectionate to her, and there was no need for her to see the hateful book? She did not think that she would ever read it, unless he could assure her that there was absolutely nothing in it which could cause her pain. Even then, she would not venture, perhaps. Why should she seek to revive the pangs and emotions which had made her heart ache formerly, Every fresh page, too, would be

turned in fresh suspense that he had found some disagreeable or paltry trait in her, discerned her meaner thoughts over well. She would not read it; she would try to forget it. The cross was small; he had given her so much that she could not sulk at bearing so light a burden for him. Nevertheless she did not ask for details of his work, and he volunteered none; so by degrees the subject became tacitly tabooed between them.

Verschoyle's friends called on his wife; invitations were frequent and many. The play he had spoken of to her was produced, and her heart beat and her cheeks flushed when the hero of the evening came on the stage to bow his acknowledgments to an enthusiastic audience. Verschoyle bought his wife a brougham and a victoria, and they took a trip to Switzerland. Life had become so rich and full and varied, that she wondered how she could have borne her former state even with the sullen patience she had shown.

One day after their return, she was descending from her carriage in Bond Street, when Mrs. Wilson passed. The woman stared at her incredulously, with mouth agape, and Alice stopped at once, smiling.

"Have you forgotten me, Mrs. Wilson?"

"Well, I'm blessed if it isn't Alice Durand! I couldn't believe my eyes." The clasp of her black

cotton gloves relaxed, and a gleam of suspicion came into the light eyes, so like her nephew's. "You're very fine," she said. "A carriage, dear me! Have you come into a fortune?"

"I am married," said Alice, abruptly. "Didn't you see the announcement in the papers? I am married to Mr. Verschoyle, the novelist, whose secretary I used to be when I was staying with you."

"And he's married you!" repeated the boardinghouse keeper, astonished. "That was a good thing, wasn't it? He seems to be doing very well."

"He is-rather," replied Alice, quietly amused.

"I must say," remarked Mrs. Wilson, "that I never saw you looking so well. . . . Quite a remarkable change. I shouldn't have known you if you hadn't stopped first. Though I always thought you'd make a good-looking woman with some more flesh on your bones. I've seen thin black crows of girls turn out that way before. I like your hat and cape, my dear. I hope it isn't rude to make remarks!"

"Not at all, Mrs. Wilson. I am glad you approve of them. The hat came from Paris. How is the house going on? Are Miss Gribble, and Mrs. Jackson, and Mr. Barker still with you?"

"Yes, and the Kennedys too, and the old captain, who is deafer than ever. They'll be interested to

hear about you. I suppose it's no good asking you to come to tea one day? You're too grand now."

"I'll come with pleasure," said Alice. "I thought of coming several times, but I always have so much to do. We've been abroad twice, you know, and we go out a great deal."

"You've been married some time, I suppose?" asked Mrs. Wilson.

"Yes, four months," said Alice. "Good-bye, Mrs. Wilson. I have to meet my husband, somewhere. Remember me to everybody." She laughed softly. "How is—George?"

"I haven't seen him lately. When I do, I'll tell him I've seen you."

Mrs. Wilson pursued her way quite excited.

Alice told Verschoyle that she had met George Wilson's aunt.

"I believe she thought I wasn't respectable at first," she said laughing; "and afterwards I know she was dying to ask what your income was. I promised to go and see her."

"You are not a snob," he said. "By the way, I met Lionel Saunderson just now. He wants your head for his new picture, but is afraid to speak to you in case you may consent to sit out of good nature and regret it afterwards. What do you say? It is a great compliment, of course."

She glowed.

"Yes, it is a compliment. Fancy an R. A. want-

ing to paint me, Anthony!"

"Remarkable!" He laughed. "You see you are really a pretty woman; it isn't only I who think so. Will you write to him?"

"I suppose the sittings would take up a good deal of time," she said, thoughtfully. "You might be wanting me. It might be a nuisance."

"Oh, I should agree, Alice. It will make me proud to see my wife in the Academy next year!"

"I wonder what I shall be this time—a Medusa or an angel?" she asked, with sudden bitterness. "I seem to be a favourite model for every one! My soul, and now my face."

He cast a pained glance at her, and stiffened. She turned away with a pettishness she had never shown before. He went out without speaking to her again, and she put down her needlework, and cried. She had been nervous, irritable, and unwell all day, and as she had not told him that she was feeling unwell, of course he could not be expected to comprehend the ensuing symptoms. She wished she hadn't said that about her soul and her face; it sounded like a reproach, and God knows she had no right to find fault with him; and as little reason to be low-spirited. She had everything possible to make a

woman happy; her days were a round of ease and pleasure. To remind herself how much she had to be grateful for, she precipitated herself backward a few months; shut her eyes and recalled the dingiest lodging-house bedroom she had ever lived in, and the worst-cooked chop which had ever been her lot; and opened them to feast upon the art treasures of her drawing-room, the elegance of her gown, and the diamonds on her hand. She was better-looking, too, than she had ever been in her life, or had ever expected to be, which must be a satisfaction to any woman; physically and mentally she had grown since her marriage; the bud nipped by the frost had expanded and bloomed into fair womanhood in the hothouse. She owed everything to her husband, and she had snubbed him.

Fresh tears flowed.

"It is because I am not quite the thing to-day," she told herself. "I'll say I am sorry when he comes home."

They had had tiffs of a more decided kind before; she was quick tempered, and he could be cynical and severe. But he had no sullenness, and she was penitent in a moment. It was the peculiar ingratitude of her petulance in this case which moved her to such deep remorse. She despised herself for the ill-temper she had no right to feel, much less to show.

What must he think of her? Would he write this petty discord down as a black mark against her name?

Her hands trembled over the needlework, and she dropped it, and strolled about the room restlessly. She wished she had spoken to him again before he went out. The longer an unkind word is left unretracted, the deeper impression it makes upon the mind. All the time he was out he would be thinking her childish and unreasonable at the least, and once he had praised her for the very quality she lacked to-day. And one never knows when something may not happen. He might be run over, and she might never see him again to say that she was sorry.

Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright and humid when the butler came to the door announcing a visitor.

"Mrs. Standish, ma'am."

An elegant woman in mourning appeared, and for a moment she and Alice confronted each other in silence. The stranger smiled.

"You don't know me," she said, advancing with outstretched hand. "In Tony's absence I must introduce myself. You have heard him speak of his cousin, Laura Standish?"

"No," replied Alice. "I did not know that he had a cousin."

"The humbug! Has he forgotten my existence!

And yet we were very good friends before my marriage. I have just returned from India, and naturally I came to see Tony first, as he is my only relative."

"Indeed," said Alice, warmly. "I am sure he will be delighted to see you. I am expecting him home at six o'clock. You are not in a hurry, I hope? Only that we have an engagement for this evening, I would beg you to remain and dine with us."

"You are very kind," murmured Mrs. Standish. "You must come and see me. I am stopping at the Langham. It is quieter for a lone lorn woman than one of the big new hotels."

"You are alone then?" said Alice, politely. "Your husband is not with you?"

"Dear me, no!" exclaimed Mrs. Standish. "I am a widow, you know, only I won't wear weeds because I hate them so."

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" said Alice.

"You need not apologize, my dear. Poor Arthur has been dead three months, so the wound has had time to heal!"

She laughed softly, and Alice received the impression that she was heartless or had not cared for the departed very much. She was tall, and splendidly formed, with red hair, aquiline features, a well-bred voice, and the manner of a woman of the world. For some reason she made Alice feel young, self-

conscious, and gauche. Shyness was not one of her failings as a rule, but she had the idea that she was being criticized, which had a paralyzing effect on her, and she had a particular desire to appear at her best before her husband's cousin.

"And so," resumed Mrs. Standish, "Tony has gone the way of all flesh, after escaping the toils so long! It was such a surprise to hear that he was married! I could scarcely believe it."

"Why not?" said Alice.

"I had an idea that he was invulnerable. A man of his position who remains single till thirty-five has a good chance of keeping his freedom altogether. You must be very fascinating!"

"I don't think so," said Alice, colouring. "I— I suppose it suited him to marry. Do you take cream and sugar in your tea, Mrs. Standish?"

"Thanks. Dear Tony, he has made a wonderful name for himself. How did you come to meet?" Alice hesitated.

"I was his secretary," she said at length, bravely. "Didn't you know?"

"I have only just returned from the Back of Beyond, you must remember," said Mrs. Standish, smiling. "His secretary! Indeed! That is quite a romance. I received no more from him than a newspaper cutting. He was always a bad correspondent."

She was stirring her tea as a latch-key grated in the front door.

"Here is my husband already," said Alice. "He must have guessed that you were here!"

Verschoyle came into the room with some flowers in his hand.

"I brought you these, Alice," he began, and then stopped short as his eyes fell on the visitor's face. She had risen, and they confronted each other in silence for a moment. There was a smile on her lips which trembled—a very beautiful smile.

"Laura," he said, in a low tone of wonder, and dropped the flowers to take her hands.

"You did not expect me, did you?" she said. "I thought I would give everybody a little surprise."

"You were always an erratic person. I am awfully glad to see you, my dear woman."

"And I to see you," she said. "You haven't changed a bit in five years. It is the same old Tony." Her tone sharpened from sentiment to vivacity, and she withdrew her hands from his. "There is an opportunity for you! For God's sake say somethink kind, or I shall feel ninety!"

"You look seventeen."

"What an insult! You know how I always despised an ingénue. Make it five-and-twenty, Tony."

"By all means. I only meant to convey that you were more charming than when you went away."

"That's better. And so," she added, sinking on to the couch again, "you are married!"

"Yes."

He smiled, and simultaneously they both looked at his wife, who was sitting somewhat neglected behind the tea-table.

"It is my turn to congratulate you. Why didn't

you send me a piece of wedding-cake?"

"We didn't have one, did we Alice?" said Verschoyle. "Our wedding was a very quiet affair. I hate a fuss."

"Yes, you always hated a fuss," she said, with a slight laugh. "I suppose I ought to have written to you, but as I was coming home, I thought my felicitations would keep."

"I'll excuse you."

"But I didn't forget you. I have brought you a wedding present to prove it." It was to Alice she spoke now. "I hope you like repoussé silver teasets? They are the things everybody brings from India, I believe. I couldn't find anything else but shawls, and I wanted something for both of you."

"How very kind of you to think of us," said Alice. "We shall value it doubly because it will be the only present we have received."

"Really? What hard luck!"

"Our own fault," said Verschoyle. "The privacy

of our wedding, you know. Are you going to settle here, Laura?"

"In London, do you mean, or England? I shall make a home somewhere, certainly."

"Of course you will take off your things and dine with us," he said hospitably.

"I should be delighted," she said. "I will not pretend that I hanker after a solitary meal at my hotel. But your wife tells me that you are dining out?"

"Yes, we are going to the Ellisons," said Alice. "Don't you remember, Anthony?"

"Oh, send an excuse. There are two of us, so our absence cannot disarrange the table by leaving anybody partnerless."

"As you like," said Alice.

"Pray don't let me keep your wife at home if she wishes to go out," said Mrs. Standish, amiably. "I know how tiresome it is to have one's arrangements upset at the last moment. I can come another day."

"You don't mind staying at home, do you, Alice?" asked Verschoyle.

"Not at all," she replied, "if you can think of a suitable excuse for our absence."

"Say the truth—that my cousin has returned unexpectedly from India, and something civil in the way of regrets, and send a messenger boy with it."

"Very well," said Alice, obediently.

She went away to write and dispatch the note. Anthony had dropped into an arm-chair. Mrs. Standish looked at him. The door was shut; they were alone. A moment had come which must bring many emotions with it for both of them, many memories, as the echoes in a sea-shell recall the storms of the past.

She was twenty-four when he saw her last, and she had changed little. Five years—even five years of India—do not make much difference to a young woman who takes care of herself. She was as beautiful as ever—better looking in some ways perhaps. Her figure had gained by its fulness; there was a deeper subtlety in the smile of her lips and the glance of her eyes. Black suited her colouring too.

It was the woman who spoke first, with a tremor in her voice.

"You must have been on your honeymoon when my husband died. What a curious coincidence!"

"I suppose it is. Life can be so unreal!"

"You found consolation at last in your secretary. How romantic of you! Had you been reading the Family Herald?"

He took time to concoct his answer. He was a man who was seldom at a loss, but this meeting was one of the episodes of his life. They had parted with passionate abandon on the side of the woman, who

had been willing to throw herself into his arms forever; with renunciation on the side of the man, who
owed as much to their kinship as to his own honour.
Now that they were again together, to pretend that
he had forgotten would be an affectation; to suggest
that he still loved her and regretted the sport of
destiny which had kept him single for five years in
order to marry him a month before her husband
died, would be to insult his wife, himself, and her.
He sought refuge in an attitude of sentimental
comedy, suggested by her last remark, as though
the old passion which had rent their souls in twain
had been no more than a trivial affair between a man
and woman of the world.

"Ah, my dear Laura," he said, smiling, "you should have regained your freedom sooner! I tried to wear the willow for ever, but what would you have? Man is human, flesh is weak. Alice is nice, is she not?"

"Oh, charming!" She smiled too, and her eyes wandered, those deep blue eyes which contrasted so artistically with her Burne-Jones hair. "You used not to admire dark women, but of course your taste has changed."

"We all change as we grow older," he said.

"You brute!" she exclaimed. "Do you mean that I am looking plain?"

"Heaven forbid that you should accuse me of

such vile imputation!" he said, with hands upraised in affected horror. "Did I not say that you were more charming than ever!"

She had fallen in with his tone, he was happy to see. No doubt she was as relieved as he was to find an easy way of breaking the ice, and beginning a natural, cousinly friendship.

They were talking of mutual acquaintances in England and India, when Alice returned.

"The note has gone," she said. "Anthony why have you let your cousin keep on her things? Would you like to come into the bedroom and take them off?"

"Thanks," said Mrs. Standish, rising. "You will have to excuse my walking costume, both of you. I did not expect to stay."

The women went away together—the woman he had loved, and the woman he had married, and Verschoyle sank into uneasy reverie.

What did Laura think of him? Her comedy was a trifle forced, perhaps, but there might be nothing more tragic behind than the chagrin of a spoilt woman at the loss of her empire. It would have been much more flattering to her vanity, he was aware, if she had returned to find him still free, although his marriage, contracted under the impression that he would never love again, had been the greatest compliment, if she had known it, which his

fidelity could have paid her. Once she had cost him more pangs than he cared to remember; he would have given the rest of his life for a year with her; and now, after five years, they met again. His thoughts grew feverish. . . .

The past and the present; they stood together, the two women of his life, and he wondered again what one of them was thinking. That red hair of hers gleamed like burnished copper; she flamed across the room, and her splendour threw the quieter style of Alice in the shade.

The girl sat subdued and silent, as though conscious of a disadvantage. He was annoyed. She was his wife, whatever the other had been. The possessor would have had her make the most of herself under this woman's eyes. Why should she seem stupid, when she could sometimes talk so well? He knew Laura's bitter-sweet smile of old. If she went away and pitied him!

He was doubly charming, in order to cover his annoyance and Alice's silence. Naturally, reminiscences formed a large part of the discourse between Laura Standish and himself. They could smile over a dozen old incidents which conveyed no meaning to the young wife. Laura talked much of India too, and society there. Kipling was discussed, of course; she said his women were exaggerated, and Verschoyle looked sceptical.

"You were always a dangerous woman your-self," he said. "I don't take your opinion."

"I was young and frivolous when you knew me," she retorted. "Now I am—nearly thirty, alas!"

If she had not known that he knew her age, she would have said "twenty-eight."

He saw her home in a hansom at ten o'clock. He remembered bringing her home from the theatre in a hansom once upon a time, and no doubt she remembered it too. Old sensations revived as he saw her red hair beside him in the lamplight; and the whirl of the wheels, the pattering of the horse's hoofs on the asphalt, and the scent of violets, drew pictures in the night for both of them.

"I am afraid we have talked a great deal of nonsense," she said, suddenly. "It makes me feel quite sentimental to be with you again, Tony! You said that you would fix a night for you and your wife to come and dine with me?"

"I am afraid we are full up for this week, and if you knew how busy I was, my dear Laura!"

"Well, make it next week. Come Monday."

"Not Monday, I am afraid."

"I won't be put off!" she exclaimed. "Tuesday, then."

"So be it."

He went into the hotel with her, remained a few minutes talking in the hall, and said good-night.

When he stopped under a lamp-post to light a cigar he realized that the evening had been one of tension, which was only now beginning to relax. He had been wound up like a machine to smile, to say the right thing, to maintain an easy familiarity neither self-conscious nor overdone. He had played a difficult part well enough, in fact, to earn his own commendation and esteem, but—how much of his attitude had been feigned, and how much real?

With the night air on his face, he walked along thinking, but his reflections seemed to be curiously trivial even to himself. This woman had held his heart in thrall for five years, and yet, in the first hours of their re-union, he had been able to perceive that her hair was dyed!

Surprise dawned upon him, amazement. The reality was so much less potent than the fancy; the woman herself had so much less effect upon him than the memory to which his imagination had clung. He was almost chagrined to discover that the tragedy of his life had become a farce, that he had been wearing the willow for a ghost. The old passion was dead. He no longer feared her, thrilled at her touch. The faded rose-leaves of the past, clung with faint sweet perfume to her presence, but it was merely sentiment that she aroused—refined sentiment and warm friendship for a woman who was related to him, and who shared with him alone

the memory of many confidences and a keen grief. If she had found him single, the old influence might have reasserted itself; he might have married her, who knows? But he was not sorry that it was beyond his power to do so. He was content with the step he had taken from motives so purely intellectual, so curiously passionless.

It was an intense relief to him to make sure that this was so. The first sight of her had stirred him to the core. What a tragedy if he had loved her still! How easily may a man make a ruin of his life! By so slight a span of time had he missed the opportunity of her widowhood! He only hoped that her memory had been even shorter than his own. He thought of her kindly. She was very beautiful. A woman of society, and used to admiration, the caressing sentiment of her manner probably meant no more than the habitual desire to attract.

He would not be at all offended if she cared for him no longer. He had no more right to expect loyalty to the past from her, than she had had to expect it from him. They had loved, and suffered a while, and all had blown over.

Alice had not gone to bed, and she came to the drawing-room door as he entered.

"Have I been gone long?" he asked, cheerfully. "She would make me come in and have a whisky-and-soda."

"It isn't late," she said. "Anthony, I am sorry I was so cross."

"What was the matter with you?" He took her hand, and rubbed it gently between his own. "I thought you were very quiet."

She stared at him with large solemn eyes.

"What do you mean? I meant what I said to you when we were talking about Mr. Saunderson."

"Ah!" He dropped her hand. "I had forgiven—forgotten, you see. Didn't I bring you flowers as a peace-offering this afternoon? Laura was here, so I could not talk to you then. I am going to put the book aside for a time."

"No—no!" she cried, vehemently. "You haven't forgiven, or you wouldn't say that! I shall feel horrible if you don't go on with it—as though I were in your debt for everything I possessed, down to the shoes on my feet and the food I eat. I couldn't bear that, Anthony!"

"My dear child," he said, "what ideas you have! It is usual for a woman to be supported by her husband."

"But our case is different. I knew at the time why you married me. Words were not wanted; I quite understood. You wished to see how I should develop with a change of circumstances; you tried an experiment at some cost to yourself. You thought the conditions worth while, and so did I. I couldn't

be so mean as to ask you to stop now. Of course—of course the book must be written."

He put his arm round her very tenderly and drew her to his side, and kissed her brow.

"I only meant to put it aside for a little while, dear. It was never my intention to finish it this year."

"I was feeling headachey and nervous to-day," she murmured, with a tremble of her lips. "You must excuse me. I hate to be a fool!"

"You are anything but a fool," he said. "Be easy; I have a great opinion of the contents of that little head of yours. And you stayed up for me in spite of feeling unwell? That was sweet of you."

He kissed her again. His manner had never been more gentle and affectionate. She drew away from him nevertheless, and he looked conscious of a repulse.

"I think I'll go to bed now," she said.

"Yes, I can see you are tired. I had really forgotten the incident of the afternoon when Laura was here, or I should have known why you were so quiet." He laughed a little. "I thought you didn't like Laura."

She coloured, and did not speak.

"Don't you like her?" he asked, curiously.

"Not very much," replied the girl. "I shouldn't

have been so rude as to say so if you hadn't asked me. She is very handsome."

"Why don't you like her?" he asked.

He was always interested in her impressions of persons and things, and in this case he was doubly interested to discover why Laura, an undoubtedly fascinating woman when she chose, had failed to please his wife.

"I-don't-know," murmured Alice.

She did know, but for once she could not bring herself to tell him what she thought. It had annoyed her to hear a stranger call him "Tony," when she knew that she would not venture upon such a familiarity herself. The woman had made her feel an outsider in her own home, and she resented it as she always resented an injury, fancied or real. If Mrs. Standish never gave her any other cause for dislike, that intimate shortening of her husband's name would be enough to prevent them being real friends.

"You must know!" insisted Verschoyle, watching her under his lids as he had a way of doing when he did not quite understand her.

"She is your cousin: I do not wish to comment upon her."

"You provoking minx!"
She laughed; the cloud had sped.

"I shall probably like her better when I know her better. I always detest strangers."

When she was alone, however, she frowned once more. A faculty of putting two and two together was part of her fatal heritage. She always remembered the things which people of happier temperament forgot. In this case she recalled two incidents of their honeymoon which had conveyed something definite to her at the time, and asked herself a pertinent question:

"Is Mrs. Standish the red-haired woman who was unreasonable?"

Laura's remark about the friendship which had existed between "Tony" and herself before her marriage, and a certain caressing note in her voice, suggested an old *tendresse* to Alice's suspicious nature. Had there ever been anything between her husband and his cousin?

"At any rate he didn't want to marry her, or I suppose he could have done so," she thought. "It must have been one-sided, if anything."

Chapter XI

RS. STANDISH knew better. Her little prudent transposition of facts had not been wasted. She was pacing her bedroom in a wrapper at this moment, thinking all the things she could not say. Her red hair hung down; she might have been a witch from the wildness of her eyes, the contortion of feature which portrayed the anguish of her soul.

She had not forgotten; she loved him still. By her husband's deathbed, she had watched the life flicker out with an uplifting of her spirit which no conventional grief could tame. She had never loved him, even when she married him as a girl. Since she had known Verschoyle, and the one great passion of her life, she had writhed like the bound in purgatory.

Of course she had passed her time as other women of her class. She had been admired and spoilt by idle men with nothing else to do, she had been a hostess of renown, and a correct wife, as the world goes, with a faint, false smile and a civil word ever ready for the man who worked for her, and hope-

lessness like a canker at her breast. That with his bull's strength Standish might die before her, while she was still young enough to be desired of men, was the last thing she had dared to expect. But it had come, and for a day or two what dreams she had dreamed! The rose and golden flush of a heavenly dawn had spread across the sky; no girl awaiting her lover had ever felt more tenderly disposed to all the world. Her plans were made for the homecoming; she had already rehearsed the meeting with the man who had torn himself away from her with such a wrench five years ago. That he would marry her eagerly, she had not doubted. It was not in her nature to imagine that she could be forgotten. And he had not married; he had remained single amidst a host of temptations, courted and admired.

The newspaper which had dashed her from heaven to earth, was among her letters still, and she could close her eyes and see the blue pencilmarks and the printed words.

For a day and a night she had shut herself up like a wounded beast in her lair. Her guilty gladness at her husband's death had turned into a scorpion's sting.

It was curiosity concerning the girl he had married, and a morbid fascination, which had brought her home so soon. A wiser woman would have



"Still young enough to be desired of men." Page 120.



avoided London for a time, but she had been unable to resist the temptation of seeing him again. She thought she could trust herself; perhaps she had hoped that he would have changed to disillusion her.

Needless to say, her opinion of Alice was small. The girl had good features, she was obliged to admit, but that was all.

"If she had not told me that she was his secretary, I should have guessed her something of the sort," she thought, with the sneer of bitter jealousy. "'Young person' is stamped on her for any eyes to read. That Anthony of all men should have made such a marriage! I did not think there was any one in the peerage good enough for him!"

If he had married the daughter of a duke, a belle of society, even a fashionable actress, she would have felt less chagrin. But to be succeeded in his heart by a young woman of no importance whom the merest chance had thrown across his path! It was unendurable.

"Does he love her as he loved me?" she wondered. "Can he love a woman so different from me?"

His words came back: "We all change as we grow older." She did not believe any man could change as much in that way.

"If I had been here, he would not have married

her," she told herself. "My absence ruined me. Men are all alike. With them absence makes the heart grow fonder—of somebody else!"

She had a miserable night, tossing and turning—feverish excitement at meeting him again, mingled with despair at the circumstances. To be obliged to smile at his wife and talk to him as she would to an outsider was tragic. Why had she been such a fool as to come to London? Why had she not remained out of sight for ever, instead of preparing unnecessary torments for herself? She hated Alice. It had cost her an effort which made her heart bleed to talk civilly to that little cat of a girl. And she had asked her to dinner, and would play the hostess charmingly, no doubt. Anthony would expect them to kiss, perhaps! She shuddered all down her spine.

"Never!" she said, heroically. "Never, whatever he thinks of me! I draw the line at that!"

She had other things to trouble her besides Verschoyle's marriage. Her husband had not been as careful with his money, it seemed, as most people had given him credit for. He had speculated unluckily the last few years, with the result that his widow found herself left with no more than a couple of thousand pounds when the debts were paid.

A careful woman would have invested the money and lived as best she could on the proceeds. Laura Standish was an extravagant woman, and unpracti-

cal besides. She had never had anything to do with money beyond spending it, so she had come home first-class as a matter of course, and put up at the Langham, and postponed the evil moment of deciding what to do until she had seen Anthony.

Now that she had seen him, she was no nearer the cool and collected frame of mind suitable to the consideration of ways and means.

"I'll ask Anthony what I am to do," she thought.
"He was always so clever, for a novelist, at sums."

It was such a legitimate excuse for seeing him again before Tuesday, and alone, that she plucked up spirit to write him a plaintive little note.

"Dear Tony,—I am awfully worried about business. If you can spare half-an-hour this afternoon, will you come round and give me your advice? So sorry to trespass on your valuable time, but I don't know to whom else to go. I shall be in from five till seven."

When it came to the signature she paused. She was going to sign herself "yours always," but thought better of it, and put "sincerely yours" instead. He was a sober married man; it was useless to frighten him; besides, the woman might see the note.

Being so unused to economizing—the dead Stan-

dish had been lavishly generous to her, his one redeeming trait—it did not occur to her that she could possibly do without some new clothes on her return to London. A woman must dress, even if she were a widowed pauper. She spent the morning in Bond Street, among the old familiar shops, ordered a few gowns, and bought a couple of hats, and a supply of shoes and other necessaries. Everything was so satisfactory after India. She felt in a better mood when she returned with quite an appetite for lunch. It is astonishing how trifles will depress or exhilarate. Tony was still the capture of an insignificant rival's bow and spear, but she had found such a lovely toque. And he would come this afternoon, she was sure of it, and after all to see him sometimes was better than nothing-if he did not love his wife too much.

At five she awaited him in her most becoming gown, and he did not disappoint her.

"You good fellow," she said, extending a soft, white hand to him with a still softer smile. "I suppose you are wishing me back to India! I was always exacting, unreasonable, and a nuisance—wasn't I?"

"My dear Laura," he said, pressing the hand, "you know that I am ever at your service. What is the matter? What can I do for you?"

"I am sure I don't know what you can do for

me: I have nothing to suggest," she said. "The inspiration must come from your great mind, my friend. The fact is, that I have about two thousand pounds in the world."

"Two thousand pounds!" repeated Verschoyle, aghast. "Is that all?"

"I think," she said, pensively, "that it may not be as much when I have paid my milliner's and dressmaker's bills."

"It is very little," he said, looking serious. "I always supposed Standish to be a rich man."

"He made a great deal of money," she said, "but

I suppose we spent it."

"What folly—what criminal recklessness! Did he make no provision at all for you? Didn't he insure his life?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I am afraid it is all gone, dear."

"A man," said Verschoyle, strongly, "has no right to marry a woman like you, and leave her inadequately provided for."

"I quite agree with you," she said, "although he was very generous to me. I will say that for

him."

"Of course, the money must be invested at once," said Verschoyle.

"I have no doubt that you are right."

"In something perfectly secure; not Consols-

the rate of interest is so low. I will get my lawyer, who is perfectly trustworthy, to secure you at five per cent."

"How kind of you, Tony! What will my income be?"

"Two thousand pounds at five per cent. is one hundred a year."

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed, in horror, "do you imagine that I can live upon one hundred a year? Why my clothes cost three!"

He looked helpless and concerned.

"I know it is very little—to you. But I am afraid I cannot make a better investment for your money than that, Laura. All I can suggest is that —that——"

She stopped him with a hand upon his arm. The half-frivolous, half-pathetic tone she had adopted this afternoon gave place to earnest distress.

"No! no! Tony! I know what you are going to say. Don't imagine for a moment that I meant to suggest anything so low. Of course, I only want you to give me the best advice in your power—nothing more."

"I wasn't going to offer you money," he said, looking down. "I have a little place in the country somewhere which happens to be standing empty at the moment. It is quite small—just a few rooms, and a patch of garden where you could grow your

vegetables, and—and keep fowls and that sort of thing. I don't believe any one will take it, so if you'd live in it, and keep it from falling into disrepair, you would be conferring a favour on me rather than otherwise. It would save you from paying rent, at any rate; and food is so cheap there that you could come out on a hundred a year."

"Why are you sure that it won't let?" she asked.

"Oh, people want modern improvements now-adays," said Verschoyle, vaguely. "Bath-rooms and electric light, and all that sort of thing. The house is three miles from a town, too."

"Three miles!" repeated Mrs. Standish, with a little shudder.

She had never cared for walking as a girl, and after a prolonged residence in India, the idea of being separated from the nearest oasis of civilization by three miles filled her with unmitigated horror.

"I suppose it would be dull," he said, deprecatingly. "But you would make friends, of course."

"With the clergyman and the doctor and the squire," she said. "My dear fellow, I should die of ennui; but it is generous of you to propose it, and beggars cannot be choosers. I will think it over, with your permission."

"Take your leisure about it, by all means."

"You don't think it would run to a pony-trap, do you?" she asked, ingratiatingly. "Just a little cheap chaise of some kind and a Shetland to drag me about?"

"On a hundred a year?" he murmured. "Um!"

"If the country is as cheap as you say? I don't see how I could possibly manage without one," she said. "The tradespeople would never discover me. I should die of starvation like a shipwrecked mariner on a desert island!"

He smiled.

"There is a village close at hand, where you could buy the common necessaries of life."

"That makes a difference, certainly. Clothes would not come under that heading, of course! One cannot expect to dress on a hundred a year; one must be content to cover oneself. I shall manage so badly, I am sure, that even that may not be possible after a little while."

"You are heartrending," he said. "To think of you, my dear Laura, who always dress so charmingly, in rags, or—worse still!—an ill-made gown, makes me shudder. I should not sleep of nights. If I permitted such an outrage, no sin of my life would weigh so heavily on my conscience. Why—why won't you let your only kinsman, who happens to have more than enough for his own needs, help to supply yours?"

"No, Tony!" she said, sweetly, and her limpid blue eyes grew softer still. "It is not as though you were alone. You have a wife now."

"My wife would have no right to interfere, and would not seek to do so. She would not even

know."

"Ah, you propose to have secrets already!"

- "I tell Alice everything that concerns her; this would not."
- "She might be of a different opinion, if you gave her the chance," said the woman, slyly. "Wives are by nature jealous, my dear Tony. Perhaps you haven't found that out?"
 - "My wife has had no occasion to be jealous."

"Yet," she supplemented. "Say yet!"

- "She will never have any occasion to be jealous," he added, steadily.
- "How long have you been married? Four months, is it not? You are a good fellow, Tony, but are you different from other men?"

He refused to smile, and she saw that he took his new *rôle* seriously at present, and would not respond. She had a great deal of tact.

"Forgive me," she murmured. "I am in such an ill-humour with the world, that I scoff at everything and every one. You are different from other men. Who should know that better than I?"

He made a gesture of dissent. A reminiscence

had given a dreamy beauty to the woman's face, and she looked out of the window with parted lips, her hands—those long white hands which he had once kissed in a frenzy of hopeless passion—lying idly on her lap. Her thoughts had gone back, dragging his with them. They both seemed to see an evening of summer, and hear the night-wind soughing through the trees.

She aroused herself with a start and a sigh, effective if simulated, and passed her hand across her brow to brush aside the past.

"Yes, you are always a good fellow, Anthony; and as you are my cousin, I will consider myself at liberty to think over this offer of yours concerning the house. It is almost the same as taking money from you, and you will wonder at the distinction without a difference. But I may be able to persuade myself that I am improving your property for you, and I couldn't—I really couldn't—face cheap lodgings or a boarding-house; and that is what it would come to, I suppose, if I totally rejected your aid. Shall I let you know in a day or two?"

"When you like, Laura."

"Let me see, you and your wife are to dine with me to-morrow, are you not?"

"You were kind enough to ask us. But why don't you come to us again instead!"

"You remind me that I am a pauper, and cannot

afford the luxury of entertaining my friends!" She smiled with an affectation of childish gaiety. "I shan't give you champagne!" she added. "Claret—a cheap brand! You won't give my position away to any one, will you?"

"Certainly not."

"I confide in you," she said, "because we are old friends. But, even as a pauper, I have my little pride."

"Regard me as your lawyer or your doctor," said Verschoyle, gravely, "and trust me without fear." He rose. "I must leave you now. We dine out to-night. Is there anything I can do for you before we meet again?"

"No! no! Good-bye."

Her hand lingered in his. She walked to the hall with him.

"Excuse my reluctance to part from you," she said. "It is rather lonely."

She looked lonely to him somehow at that moment. It had not struck him to pity her before. In the large hall among the many strangers, the feminine figure had its pathos. She was not of the masculine type; her character was in her soft white, caressing hand. She was made to be protected and loved, and she had contrived to miss love, in spite of her necessity for it. All her life she had been asking for bread, it seemed to him, and receiving a

stone. She ought to marry again. She was not the sort of woman to be happy alone.

"Good-bye till to-morrow," he said, kindly. "Don't fret. I am sure everything will come right in the end."

"How can it?" she murmured, plaintively. "I am a lone, lorn, poverty-stricken widow, and no-body cares for me."

"It is unkind to say that—to me," he replied.

"Oh, you—you are married!" she said, with sudden viciousness. "Good-night."

Chapter XII

"She is angry that I have married," he meditated, "but that means nothing at all. The woman is always angry when the man marries. I dare say she has had a very good time in India all these years."

When he was returning home with his wife that night, she asked him where he had been in the afternoon.

"I went to the Langham to see Laura Standish," he said. "I had a note from her this morning, asking me to call."

"Why?" asked Alice. "She will see you to-morrow."

"She wished for my advice on a matter of business."

"Oh! Is she well off, Anthony?"

"No," he said.

He was not communicative, and she was not particularly curious. Only for a moment she was conscious of that sensation of well-being appertaining to the woman who is satisfied with her lot. She

could afford to pity Mrs. Standish, although she did not like her.

She gazed at the stars with quiet eyes, and drew her opera-cloak closer round her. Anthony was smoking, and the scent of good tobacco reached her nostrils, and the tip of his cigar glowed beside her. She drew a little nearer to him, to feel his arm against her shoulder. A curious thrill ran through her. Her body tingled to the finger-tips. Contemplation of the lot of the woman who was lonely, brought a revelation. She would miss him so much were he to die. If she had never known before that she loved him, she knew it now. The man she had married for a home, had become her second self, and as the full extent of her feeling for him grew upon her consciousness, her bosom heaved over her throbbing, swelling heart.

An ecstasy, so keen that it was pain as well as joy, filled her being. She had always felt that she was capable of a passion which would absorb her whole life, but she had never expected to meet the right man. That her husband should be that man seemed scarcely credible. It was as though destiny had willed that the debt owed to her mother's daughter, should be paid at last with interest a thousandfold. She had suffered for another's crime; the sins of the fathers had fallen on her shoulders, so that she had but dragged her weary footsteps through the world

until her marriage. That in itself had been compensation enough; in contented materialism she had begun to forget her outcast days. This glowing happiness raised her soul to heaven.

She stared before her with almost rigid intensity, and neither husband nor wife spoke again until they reached home. He looked at her in the light, and blinked away the lingering shadows from outside.

"You look pale," he said. "You are not chilly, are you?"

"No," she said, brusquely.

He touched her cheek with his hand.

"I want to do a little work to-night, my child. Go to bed."

"Mayn't I wait for you? I am not tired."

"No, I may be a long time."

She went to her room alone, and turned up the lights over her dressing-table, and looked at herself in the glass.

Tears welled to her eyes. With motionless features she watched them brim over and run down. She loved him, and he was hers; but with passion had come anxiety. He had not married her for love. He was kind, affectionate, considerate always; but did he care as little as before?

Fire ran through her veins, and dried the tears upon her cheeks. She trembled. The time had passed when she could be content with interest, tol-

eration. She wanted all, giving him as much. Had he remained cool while she had progressed from indifference to gratitude, liking, love! Did he know that she cared, and was she still the human document to him, and not a woman to be loved? She remembered how he had kissed her, touched her sometimes; she was his wife, and he was fond of her in a way: it might mean no more than that.

If he would only tell her that he loved her! Her emotions made her dizzy. A fierce impatience consumed her. She felt she could not live another moment in this suspense.

She moved to the door to go to him, hesitated on the threshold, and returned. What would he think of her if she burst upon him with burning words which he might not be able to return? How could she say without prelude or encouragement on his part: "I love you; do you love me?" They had never talked in that tone to each other; in their most intimate moments she had never forgotten why he had married her. He might be disturbed if she demanded vows and declarations from him now which he had never made any pretence of offering her. He might be annoyed by exactions he had not bargained for. She was his wife, the mistress of his house; he gave her all the deference, sympathy, and companionship she had any right to demand.

She must not worry him, or he might be sorry that he had burdened himself with a wife he did not love.

The girl returned to her dressing-table, and sank down on a chair. The old, depressing self-depreciation had returned. Why should he love her? How could she expect him to love her? It was not astonishing that she should fall in love with him. Her head throbbed. She was a convenience to him, nothing more; the artist's model.

Her contentment was dead from that moment. It was not her way to be demonstrative, and wear her heart upon her sleeve. Hers was the nature to conceal the aching in her breast, to bury it and cherish it in a silence of strained nerves and destroying emotions. While she had only liked him, she had been happy; now that she knew she loved him, nothing could satisfy her except the words he did not speak.

She felt changed when she rose the next morning. A new epoch had begun. It would never be the same between her husband and herself again. Her spontaneity had gone; a constraint invaded her manner towards him. They had been good friends, but friendship could not exist in the bosom of a woman who believed that she loved without return.

The sullen pride which had been her only support in the old days was all she had to depend upon now. It bade her suppress the least sign of emotion, to

steel herself against her own heart. He should not know what she felt until he showed some desire to know. She would not fling herself unasked at the feet of any man.

While he wrote this morning she brooded apart. Yesterday she had sung softly to herself over her sewing. The closed door of his study suggested an impenetrable barrier to her mind. Once more she began to hate the artist in him; his intellect, his profession, which had brought them together, seemed to separate them now. The woman panted to be regarded as a woman, not as a tool of his art.

She flushed. Suppose he found out what was the matter with her, and treasured that up to be written down too! Had he expected her to get fond of him? Would the truth surprise him very much, or was it for the sake of watching the growth of passion in her, that he had taken her home?

Instinct told her that she had guessed the truth, and a hysterical desire to scream beset her. She rose, her brow burning, her hands clenched, to pace the room and try to smother the volcano which this sudden idea had awakened.

She had resented his insight in the old days. Latterly she had yielded to him the only marriage portion she had brought; but she could not make her new-found love the property of his pen; she would not have her passion dissected for his ag-

grandizement and written down to stare at her and mock her in printed words. She would rather die than that he should as much as suspect the truth, if he only meant to use it, as he had used the rest of her life, to add to the reality of his book.

When lunch time came she shrank from meeting him. It seemed to her that he must read her thoughts upon her face; but she forced herself to talk, and he was too full of the magazine story he was engaged upon, to notice anything amiss with her. Afterwards they went out together. To wear the mask successfully, she must not change her habits; there must be nothing to make him wonder, guess. She had told him several times that she was happy, and he must continue to believe it.

Nevertheless, the self-restraint she was bound to exercise had its effect upon her manner. She could not be natural, and she had never been a clever hypocrite. Unconsciously, she was chilling, repellent to-day. She was determined to keep her distance, and he should keep his. She could no longer bear him to tease her as he was wont to do in his lighter moods; the touch of his hand was enough to bring her heart to her throat, the blood to her face. She could not trust herself to play with the passion of her life.

All day she had had it on her mind that she had to dine with "that woman." The artifice of society

did not come easily to her: the young tigress who had glared at the world from her lair, or fought it tooth and nail, could not purr like the domestic tabby. She was truthful, absurdly sincere, and she could not think it necessary or right to become the guest of a woman she disliked.

"I suppose I must go this time," she thought angrily, "but I shall never accept another invitation."

Laura did not mention her affairs before Alice, although there was no reason on earth why she should not have done so beyond a feminine desire to possess a secret in common with the man she loved.

He could not say anything on his own initiative, so the evening passed with no allusion to business at all, until the Verschoyles were going, when she whispered to him:

- "When can I see you again?"
- "When you like," he responded, in duty bound.
- "To-morrow afternoon, as before?"
- "Very well."
- "I can't bore your wife with my troubles," she added, in a tone of apology. "She would think me a nuisance."

Did he notice that she had so contrived that they should meet three days in succession, and twice out of the three times tête-à-tête? He said nothing in any case; his time was fully occupied, as a rule, be-

tween his work and the calls of society; but he could scarcely refuse to waste a little of it, even if he felt the tax, on a woman in trouble, who had no one else to look to. He wished, nevertheless, that she would not make a secret of the appointment by whispering about it. Laura was always fond of mysteries, he remembered, with an indulgent smile. Really there was no reason why she should not say right out before his wife that she wished to talk to him to-morrow.

Alice detected the interlude without comment.

"They have secrets, then," she thought. "There is something I may not know."

She frowned. It was not pleasant to be treated as an outsider where her husband was concerned. Her pity for Laura Standish was lost in a sense of offence, and her dislike for the woman who called him "Tony" increased. She hoped he would tell her what the whisper was about, but he said nothing on the way home. Evidently it was considered that she had no right to know.

"You used to see a great deal of Mrs. Standish before her marriage, didn't you?" she asked him as they went up-stairs.

"Not before her marriage—afterwards. She was brought up by an uncle in Jersey."

An expression of arrested attention dawned on Alice's face.

"After the marriage! Wasn't she married in London, then?"

"Yes; but I was abroad at the time. I only remembered her as a child when we met a couple of years afterwards."

"I see," said Alice, thoughtfully. "Did she love

her husband?"

"She may have fancied so once upon a time.
. . . God knows."

"But she wasn't happy?" she supplemented.
"She realized that she had made a mistake?"

"I am afraid so. In some ways, Laura has had an unfortunate life. I am sorry for her."

Alice drew away from him. Her face had grown dark, sullen. There was a stormy light in her eyes.

"She told me a lie!" she thought. "She said they had been intimate before her marriage, not afterwards. She must have had a motive. What was it?"

Her head was throbbing. All the latent suspiciousness of her nature was aroused. She hated women who told stories; she never believed in them, and she was sure that this one was treacherous and false: her blue eyes were always half-closed, like a cat's, and her hair was dyed.

"I suppose she married for money, and met a man she cared for afterwards," she concluded. "He almost admitted that it was so. That man was

Anthony; otherwise why should she trouble to tell a lie about such a simple matter? I felt an antipathy to her directly she came in. I knew she loved Anthony. But it doesn't matter. He has married me, not her. If she ever had any influence over him, she must have lost it long ago."

A keen satisfaction mingled with her hatred of the other woman. She was the wife; whoever the past might belong to, the present was hers. She did not pity Laura. It was in her nature to be as jealous as a savage; it put her in a rage even to discover that a woman who had once loved him, and perhaps loved him still, had re-appeared upon the scene. She was still willing to admit, as she had been on the first days of her marriage, that she could not have been the first. But the shadows of the past must remain shadows; they must not materialize into women with abundant red hair, and blue eyes which smiled and sneered, and soft lips, and clinging hands, and obtrude themselves upon the present. The existence of Mrs. Standish made the subject of experiment begin to ask herself what her own position could be; whether a man's passion could continue to be subservient to his intellect; or whether the girl he had married for the sake of his art would be trampled upon if love came into his life again.

Had he ever loved Laura Standish?

Again those brief incidents of the honeymoon came back—clues of gossamer. He had certainly been thinking of Mrs. Standish then.

"But a man may remember a mere friend," thought Alice; "and, after all, she is his cousin. I don't believe he ever loved her."

She disliked Laura Standish so much, in fact, that she would not give her the credit of being able to attract him. Pride helped to crush jealousy. His eyes had passed her by until her history was known to him; why should they have lingered on the other woman?

"If there were anything, it was all on one side, or he has forgotten," she decided. "I hope Mrs. Standish will go away soon. She has the soft voice of a hypocrite; she tells lies. I do not like her. I do not want to think of her any more."

She threw her head back with a motion of impatience, and began to undress at last. She liked the look of her long black hair over her shoulders, which were very white and no longer too thin. Her eyes, both brilliant and tender, flashed under their long lashes; she ran her hand over her throat and upper arm to feel the soft white flesh. She did not utter her thought, or even frame it mentally, but she was glad she was as good-looking in her way as Laura Standish.

Chapter XIII

A LICE suspected that Mrs. Standish had made another appointment with her husband, but she would not ask. If she asked, he might think she was jealous: the woman who is jealous is in love.

So when he said that he was going out "on business" in the afternoon, she only smiled bitterly, and sat for half-an-hour after he had gone, with her black eyes fixed on vacancy.

She was trying not to be imaginative; but she could not help remembering that the intimacy of her husband and this woman dated from a later period than she had first been told. She could no longer comfort herself with the fact that he might have married her if he had chosen.

Verschoyle meanwhile pursued his way in supreme unconsciousness of his wife's black mood. His intentions respecting Laura were so harmless that it did not occur to him that any one could imagine otherwise. Even when Mrs. Standish greeted him with a lingering look from her blue eyes, and a pressure of the hand, he did not respond save in the way of pure friendliness.

"Well, you have made up your mind about the cottage?" he asked, cheerfully.

"Yes," she said. "I am ever so much obliged to you, Tony, but I have decided against it. I should die, I am sure. I would rather starve peacefully in London."

He looked grave.

"I do not see how you can live in London on two pounds a week in decent comfort."

"I don't propose to perform the impossible," she replied, with a sweet smile. "I shall spend the capital."

"Oh, madness!" he exclaimed. "And when it is gone?"

"It will last a long time if I am economical. I shall not remain at the Langham."

"What do you call 'economical'?"

"If I spent four hundred a year," she said, defiantly, "I should be able to hold out for five years. Five years is a long time."

"But even five years will come to an end."

"I may marry," she suggested, with half-veiled eyes on his face.

Anthony sat quiet and thoughtful.

"Yes," he acquiesced, "it is most probable—if you wish to do so." He smiled. "After all, I believe your bold feminine tactics are the wisest. You will do better, no doubt, to remain in touch

with people, than to bury yourself in the country. Your investment will be more profitable than mine."

"Are you bitter?" she asked.

"Not in the least!"

She smiled also—on the wrong side of her mouth—then flushed.

"I am alone, I am alone!" she said, passionately.

"It is all very well for people to sneer at women who marry for money, but what is a woman in my position to do? I shall hate it, of course, but I can't starve. I must have some one to look after me."

"I think you are quite right."

"I am the most sentimental creature alive, for all that. I would rather live on—yes, on two pounds a week with the man I cared for, than in a palace with another!"

"An admirable confession, Laura."

She began to whimper.

"I believe I was born unfortunate. I am never to be happy."

"You are likely to be as happy in a second marriage as you were with Standish," he said after a moment. "Don't despair. I am sure you have more spirit than you pretend, and will make the best of circumstances."

"I used to have spirit," she said, "but it's all gone. My God, why do I live?"

She burst into tears.

Verschoyle felt uncomfortable. The sight of a woman crying did not affect him deeply as a rule, because it was his opinion that most women could cry for nothing, but this particular woman had once been the dearest in the world to him. He sympathized with the pang he would have suffered five years ago.

"I cannot believe that you wish to die," he said, tamely. "You are young, beautiful; many years of happiness lie before you still, I do not doubt."

"It is impossible," she said, "that I should ever be happy. Fate is against me."

" No-no!"

"Why did you marry, Anthony?"

His forehead grew damp. He rose. That she should dare enough to ask him that question point-blank, told him how much she must care still, how great was the disappointment she was unable to conceal.

"You were tied," he said, huskily. "There seemed no prospect. You cannot reproach me. I was faithful to your memory for five years."

"And then—after vowing to remember me for ever—you fell in love with a girl!"

He could have appeased her jealousy had he chosen; for a moment, indeed, it was on the tip of his tongue to confess that no sentiment such as she

supposed had instigated his marriage. But he checked the explanation which would not be fair to Alice. She, who was his wife, must be considered first.

"I was strongly moved. You must forgive me. I hoped—I believed, that you had ceased to think of me long ago."

She wept without response.

"For God's sake don't cry!" he begged. "You make me feel a murderer!"

"You should have taken me away at the time," she said. "I knew it was a mistake. I knew that if we separated then, it would be forever!"

"What can I say?" he asked, helplessly. "Shall I say that if I had known you were going to be free so soon, I should have waited?"

"Then you don't love her!" she flashed. "You, too, have made a mistake!"

"I might have felt that I owed it to you to wait, that the past had its claims upon me. . . . How can one foresee the future? You cannot blame me, Laura."

"Blame!" she repeated. "Of course no one is to blame. But that does not make me hate your wife the less. Women are never logical, you know."

He withdrew from her to wander across the room and back.

"I should have stayed in India," she said, drying her eyes. "I was a fool! I thought I could trust myself, and I felt that I must see you again. What do you think of me now? Have I lost caste? One is not allowed to speak so plainly to a married man, is one? It is only the man who may speak plainly to the woman!"

This mingling of pathos, bitterness, and reproach, should have been heartrending, but the pained expression he forced was no more than a mask for a tolerably selfish content. The more he saw of her, the more he realized that the magic key, with which she had once unlocked the casket of his soul, was lost. Nothing could have convinced him like this abandon on her part, which affected him only as a man who is interested in his species is affected by sorrow which concerns him not. He was conscious all the while that she wept and appealed to him with her eyes, that her lashes were darker than they used to be, and that she did not forget to wipe them gingerly, that her charming hair did not owe its lustrous hue entirely to nature, and that her attitude of despair upon the couch revealed the best lines she possessed. A mental calculation limited his respect for her. Was this really the only time that she had posed and shed tears becomingly to melt the heart of man? He could not believe that no rehearsals had taken place. She was perfect. Other women's

tears produced a red nose and a contortion of features unpleasing in the extreme. He had only seen Alice cry once, and then she had had the tact to cover her face. Alice had not practised weeping as a fine art. She was always herself, genuine.

His face softened.

A touch awakened him from his dream of another woman.

"Kiss me once," said Mrs. Standish, impetuously, "and you shall never suspect that I have a heart again!"

"My dear Laura," he murmured.

"Oh, you model married man!" she taunted. "Don't be frightened. Your darling need never know."

He was extremely annoyed; she ought to have seen that he was not in the mood.

"I am not afraid of my wife," he replied, taking refuge in offence.

"Are you afraid of me, then?"

"No!" he retorted, stung to brutality.

She coloured a deep rosy tint which made him ashamed of himself, and, to atone, he bent his head and kissed her on the cheek.

She sat rigid under the caress which was so passionless.

"I hope," she said, presently, "that you will put this afternoon out of your mind, Anthony. I do

not want to lose your friendship as well as your love."

- "You have not lost it."
- "Do not tell your wife," she murmured, "even to please her."
 - "Good heavens! what do you take me for?"
- "Forgive me," she said. "I no longer know you."

He wished with all his heart that he could get away. His tact was usually excellent; he had the chagrin on this occasion to realize that his retreat was clumsy at the least.

It was the remembrance of his sometime eloquence upon an emotion he had outgrown, which froze him into stiff embarrassment. If she recalled the details of that buried episode of their love as vividly as he did!

- "I hope," he said, "that we shall begin a new era from this date, a new era of friendship. Pray command me in any way, my dear Laura. Will you move into apartments, or take a little furnished flat?"
- "I haven't made up my mind yet," she said, tartly.
 "I will let you know."
- "Then I will wish you good-bye for the present." He extended his hand. "I should decide upon a flat."

He felt that he had been a prig, which was an

unpleasant reflection. In another way he had gained: he walked the pavement a free man. For a year—perhaps two years—she had made his life a burden of unsatisfied desire; for three years more he had seriously imagined that he loved her. Even when he had been startled into admiring Alice, it had been with the patronage of a mind set upon a vision of the red hair and blue eyes which belonged to another man. If Laura had remained in India, he would have seen her for ever as he had seen her five years ago. Now he was puzzled as to whether it were she or himself who had changed. Was it possible that he had ever been such a fool?

On the day after her return he had still admired if he had ceased to love her; she was still Laura with a halo round her, and he had been surprised at his own control. But a graduated decline of sentiment had ended in disgust this afternoon. He found her artificial and animal—an unpleasant combination; he would have her sex prudish rather than the reverse, and there was no doubt that she had meant to lure him further than he chose to go. He could no longer understand how he had ever lost his head over a woman who had been so ready to forget her marriage vows.

Yes, the last fetter had slipped to the ground, and the free man, who had been the slave of a habit, turned his eyes to the contemplation of his wife.

Her features were more regular than Laura's—so were her morals; his maturer taste recognized at last that the woman he had married was of far higher type, both physically and mentally, than the woman who had cost him the great renunciation of his life. He could not imagine that Alice, in Laura's place, would have allowed herself to cherish an illicit passion, and given herself away as Laura had done to-day. She had more sympathy, less selfishness, an infinitely higher outlook on life, more cultivation of mind, and better manners. Alice would not touch up her hair and eyebrows, and languish at a man who did not care for her.

"She is a gem," he said. "Why have I never seen it before?"

Chapter XIV

F course he was unjust to the one woman in atoning to the other for an over-long depreciation. Laura Standish loved him, and felt a claim upon him through the past.

He hurried home to Alice as though he had been separated for a length of time from a beloved bride. At last, it seemed to him, he was quite sane. He was deeply grateful to Laura for coming home; otherwise he might have remained under his delusion, and lost the fairest fruits of life.

Alice was working quietly in the drawing-room when he entered with a flush on his face.

She greeted him without enthusiasm, guessing that he had come from Mrs. Standish, and he laid some roses he had brought her in her lap.

"Thank you," she said, soberly.

Flowers had been his olive branch after their discussion about the artist. She could imagine that it was again his conscience which gave her these today.

He sat down beside her on the couch with an unusual display of affection, and put his arm round her waist.

"What have you been doing this afternoon, little woman?"

"I have been out for a walk. I have only just returned."

He drew her face towards him and kissed her on the mouth.

"You look a little pale," he said, tenderly. "Shall we go out of town for a few days?"

Alice coloured, and freed herself from his embrace, rising as though to fetch something from a table.

"I am very well," she said, "there is no occasion to be anxious."

Verschoyle bit his lip. Had she meant to repulse him? He felt as though some one had thrown a jug of water in his face. Perhaps the snub had been unintentional, thoughtless. It might be that she had really required the reel of silk.

He waited for her to return to her seat with pained and perplexed anxiety. She had never rejected his caresses before, not even at the very beginning. Had she felt a difference this time and resented it? Why should she resent it? It could scarcely annoy her to find that a passion for her had awakened in his breast.

She sat down again as far from him as the sofa would allow.

1 1841

"Have you been to see Mrs. Standish this afternoon?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered, absently, thinking of the woman beside him.

"I suppose her affairs are not settled yet?"

"In a way they are. She is very unreasonable."

The red-haired woman who was unreasonable! The white walls, the picturesque alleys and steps of Capri, came back to Alice's eyes. She saw again the Mediterranean sparkling in the sun.

"She seems lonely," she added. "It is natural that she should want you."

"Yes, it is natural," he repeated, mechanically.

He was wondering why the beauty of his wife's face and form had not warmed his dormant passion to life before. It was almost incredible that he should have been so long in falling in love with her. He covered her busy hand with his own suddenly.

"Do leave off working, and talk to me!"

She looked surprised, but obeyed.

"Then you don't wish to go out of town?"

"It is as you like, of course," she replied indifferently.

"No, it is as you like. I want to give you an extra pleasure, if you will tell me how."

"I am quite content."

"Would you like a new ornament?"

"You have already bought me so many. You are so generous."

Fair words, all of them, but not the words or the tone that a woman uses to a man she loves.

Gazing at her long and hard, their eyes met; hers shifted at once. He sighed, and rose.

"I believe we have something on for to-night, have we not?"

"Yes, those concert tickets."

"I get tired of these constant engagements," he said. "If you could go out alone, I should accept none for the next few weeks. The mood is on me to work at nights."

"Pray do not consider me," she said. "It will please me just as well to remain at home."

"At your age a woman requires amusement."

"I am not always amused by 'amusements'," said Alice, truthfully.

Verschoyle closed the door. He did not feel like working at the moment, and he had nothing else to do, but her manner had driven him away from her. He went to his study, and dropped wearily into an arm-chair.

"She does not care for me," he told himself.
"I have failed as I deserved to fail."

He had played with fire, and burned himself to the heart. That the punishment of her rebuff was

just, did not heal the wound which had so suddenly begun to bleed.

"I have been blind," he said, "and I thought myself a clever man. I did not offer her love when I married her. I imagined that I could treat her as a toy, and play upon her emotions for my enlightenment. It was cruel. She has her revenge. Does she know it?"

The novelist had been first, the man second. He no longer wished to watch her, to cause her even a moment's pain by analyzing her symptoms. Passions were alive which had been sleeping for five years. Once more he found himself absorbed, to the exclusion of all else, in a woman, and that woman his wife.

He had offered her the husk of himself in return for her soul; if she had come to him now and said: "Destroy your book, it pains me, and I love you," he would not have hesitated at the sacrifice. He was not a hard man, but he had not realized that he loved her.

He leaned his forehead on his hand, and sat long, lost in meditation which was for the most part gloomy. Her behaviour puzzled him. If she had been consistently cold, he could have understood; but although she had never shown more than liking for him, she had never shrunk from him before. This helped him to hope that it might merely be

an irritable mood which had distressed him; that the sudden distaste she had evinced was no more than the passing ill-temper of a young and nervous woman. Nobody was always bright; and the equability of a placid temperament would have bored him to death.

He would not make up his mind to be miserable until he had tried her again, at any rate, and he was too much in earnest to be sulky.

By-and-by he returned to the drawing-room. She smiled at him and his heart leaped.

"Do you think this leaf ought to be shaded in green or brown?" she asked, with her friendliest air.

He sat down on the end of the couch close to her, in order that he might be able to study the important question as it deserved.

"I am sure that it asks for green, Alice."

"Oh, I hate fancy work!" she said, throwing it down. "I believe I began it to punish myself for ill-temper."

"Have you been ill-tempered?"

"Don't you know I have?"

She looked shy, charming.

"I forgive you," he said, quickly, his face lightening. "I forgive you; only——" He held out his hand to her.

She put hers into it with visible reluctance. He

would not see the reluctance. He pulled her to him, and kissed her once more.

This time she did not repulse him; still less did she respond. His lips met lips which might have been a child's; his burning eyes met eyes which merely flinched. He could buoy himself with false hopes no longer. Her apparent amiability conveyed an indifference more biting than a snub.

"She does not care," he thought again. "Oh, my punishment! The man who seeks to play with souls is damned!"

He saw that he might embrace her as he chose, shower caresses upon her, and that she would yield without a murmur, because he was paying for what she sold; but that more than he had bargained for she would not yield him; the soul he had regarded as a plaything was beyond his reach.

They went to the concert together on good terms. He assisted her with her cloak as usual, and handed her in and out of the brougham. When they returned he went to his study. He was unhappy, restless, excited—and emotion of any sort is more conducive to artistic effort than the apathy of content. He felt more like doing solid work to-night than he had felt during several weeks in which the flesh-pots of Egypt had unconsciously absorbed him. He turned to the discarded novel, and lost himself in the creation in his heroine of the passion he

had failed to inspire in his wife. If it occurred to him that by thus returning to pure imagination he was acquiescing in the stultification of his marriage from the novelist's standpoint, he no longer cared. He loved her. Their relationship had found its only legitimate justification. He would have married her again to-morrow, even to torment himself as he had begun to do, with unsatisfied yearning for her love.

Verschoyle was suffering from the fatal mistake of supposing that he could analyze his wife, whereas he only half understood her. The peculiar warp of her character was as natural, under the circumstances, as his lack of comprehension. If he had kissed her a week ago as he had done this afternoon, she would have thrown her arms round his neck. The flaming hair of Laura Standish dazzled her; the jealous instincts she had inherited robbed her of her sanity. She no longer possessed either discrimination or confidence in the husband she loved.

"He never used to caress me in this way," she remembered. "He does so now to mask his liaison with this woman!"

If she had been a repetition of her mother he would have been relieved at once; she would have shown the unfounded jealousy he did not suspect, he would have reassured her, and the episode would

have ended with an embrace. He was deceived by the effects of the different circumstances, the different training the two women had received. The mother had been a pampered and spoiled only child; the girl had been taught by adversity to exercise self-control. Where the mother would have stormed, the daughter froze in silent reserve. Her quietness deceived him utterly, because it was so different from the potential passion visible in her face, from all his preconceived ideas concerning her.

The next morning Alice saw a letter scented with violets and bearing a violet and gold monogram, waiting on the breakfast-table for her husband. She could imagine that Mrs. Standish would perfume and gild her stationery.

Verschoyle smiled as he picked up the letter, and he did not tear it up after reading it, like the others he had received.

Nothing escaped Alice's notice. She spoke at last.

"I think it so vulgar," she said, "to scent notepaper. Who is writing to you—a female adorer of your books?"

"N-no," said Anthony, "not exactly."

He began breakfast with an absent expression on his face.

If Alice could have read the note it would scarcely have disarmed her. It was pitched in

Laura's usual sentimental key, full of phrases of suggestive mystery to express what she might have expressed outright:

"If I were a wise woman," she wrote, "I should not want to see you again after our last meeting; but my heart was always stronger than my head, as you know, Tony. Let yesterday cease to exist in your memory as in mine. I shall look in to see your wife one day this week.—Yours, Laura."

Verschoyle did not see much of Alice that day, and was not at all demonstrative. When they were together he seemed preoccupied, and she made wrong deductions, of course; nevertheless she received Mrs. Standish civilly when she called.

Anthony, without consulting his wife, asked Laura to luncheon. Subsequently Mrs. Standish expressed a longing to revisit Paris, and Verschoyle suggested that she should accompany them thither as his guest for two or three days.

Laura accepted with enthusiasm.

"It is so good of you, Tony," she said. "It is quite a charity to give a little pleasure to a pauper like me!"

She was fond of calling herself a pauper, and did not care who heard her. There was nothing, she knew, which people were more likely to disbelieve than such candour, whereas, if she pretended to

be well off, some one would ferret out the truth at once.

"You do not object to Laura accompanying us to Paris, do you?" asked Verschoyle afterwards of his wife.

"Not at all," she replied; "but I was not aware we were going to Paris."

"I thought it would be a pleasant change," he said wearily. "I suggested it quite on the spur of the moment. Laura was evidently longing to go, and, left as she is, I feel that I must do something for her."

They went to Paris, and the women hated each other, and Verschoyle was miserable. But they were all very gay, and Laura, who could make nothing of him, wondered whether he was a fool or deeper than he seemed.

Then he came home and plunged into work for distraction.

He wrote till the small hours with feverish eloquence. Alice did not love him; this woman of his brain loved. He poured fire into her veins from the fire in his own, until she breathed and palpitated to life. He had never created a stronger character or situation. It was real. Ambition woke once more. His book should be the best that was in him. He would get something out of life.

Laura took a furnished flat at Kensington; and

Alice did not ask where her husband went when he absented himself, so her active imagination had full play. She sat for hours, brooding over a slight, fancied or otherwise, or an impertinence on the part of Laura. It cost her the greatest effort to receive this woman at all; but she would not show that she cared. She was haunted by the fear that he would discover her secret and put it in his book. He told her nothing, but she felt sure he was engaged upon the book now, and a passion came upon her to find out what he was saying about her.

One afternoon when she was at home alone she went into his study. A middle-aged woman plain, unattractive, in the shabby black which was once her own livery, occupied her old place of a morning now.

Alice sat down at the table, and opened the drawer where he used to keep the manuscript of his book. It was there still, grown in bulk since her time. She took it out, half fearfully, and began to read.

Chapter XV

HE study was very quiet. Alice knew that she would hear her husband return, so she had no fear of being disturbed. She would not like him to catch her reading the manuscript. It would look as though she cared too much what he thought about her, and give him new material to utilize.

He had made good progress since she had ceased to be his secretary, and it was the new part, naturally, which interested her the most.

After the loss of the lover, who is George Wilson's prototype, the heroine sinks into a state of morbid despondency, whence she is rescued by the appearance of a new suitor—a man of mark this time, a brilliant young physician whose treatise on the subject of heredity had brought his name into prominence a year or two ago. He speedily becomes the materialization of her ideal, and marriage follows—a marriage which appears to be a perfect union of souls, until the arrival upon the scene of the inevitable third person. Audrey Vau-

close, one of the most accomplished actresses and attractive women of her time, takes a fancy to the husband and endeavours to alienate him from his wife. At first he resists temptation, he avoids the woman, he tries to escape from the web her fascinations are weaving round him. He has no strength for the struggle, however. He admits to Audrey one day that it was interest in his wife's antecedents which had impelled him to marry her, and confesses his guilty love at last, in a passionate letter which falls, by some mischance, into his wife's hands.

It was this point that Verschoyle had reached, and the unfinished chapter stopped short at a description of the wife's emotions on discovering the contents of this letter.

Alice laid the manuscript down. If she had been pale when she began to read, she looked like death now.

The plot was simple enough; it was no part of Verschoyle's intention to spoil so fine a subject by melodramatic treatment; it would have been even commonplace but for the under current of tragedy dimly discernible throughout; the continual harping upon the string of Destiny, which shapes all things human as in a mould whence there is no escape. There, at the outset, was the girl of morbid fancies and neurotic mind, the daughter of a woman who

had killed a man for love: a girl of potential passions, of wild longing, and emotions tamed by necessity. There, growing round her, were the circumstances most conducive to the development of that jealousy which was her heritage.

Thus far the story had developed as though of itself, so inevitably did cause and effect follow each other. It was the work of a fatalist—of one who believed with the author of *The Human Machine* that a man is what he must be, and that he has no more power to will himself virtuous than healthy or wise.

Alice did not attempt to anticipate the climax. Her imagination was entirely absorbed by the situation portrayed. The wife, who had long suspected her husband's infidelity, now possessed proof, in his own handwriting, of his guilt. He had admitted to this woman that his marriage had been contracted as an experiment, and that he had never really loved till now. The wife was forgotten in the passion of his life.

A wave of heat surged over her slowly, and departed, leaving her as cold as ice. Anthony had begun by describing her. She recognized herself, with her faculty of introspection, in every mood. He had drawn her to the life—her views, her tone, her very phrases; her own flesh and blood stared her in the face; the nerves and muscles, heart and soul,

of this miserable betrayed woman were her own. If so much was photography, why not all?

She knew now why she had been so desirous of reading this book, and why she had asked him no questions concerning it, but had concealed her curiosity, even from herself, until it could no longer be denied. She saw in it his confessional. As an artist, he was always sincere. She closed her eyes and heard him tell Laura Standish that he loved her.

In her life there was no letter; the manuscript did as well. He had married her for an experiment, as the man in his book had married. No doubt Mrs. Standish, the Audrey Vauclose of the novel, knew as much by this time as he could tell her.

"I am betrayed!" she thought, and her eyes gleamed and her hands clenched. "I was right to hate that woman from the first!"

The caresses, the display of fondness, she had misconstrued, represented a double treachery now. He had kissed her with lips which were no longer solely hers; he had soothed her with soft words, the man who came straight from her rival's side.

"He thinks me but a girl, who can be cheated with impunity," she told herself. "And that redhaired viper comes here and smiles at me! Oh, I know—I know!"

She trembled with rage. The manuscript, which

was warp and weft of her flesh, fascinated her like a snake. A desire to destroy it animated her—a desire to tear page from page, and rend it in fragments, which she could grind with her teeth and trample under foot and scatter beyond recovery. She had hated this book almost from the beginning; now she feared it as well. It knew too much, this live, dead thing—this symbol of her own soul in purgatory.

Her fingers itched to begin the work of destruction. She rose, and locked the door. He might come, but she would not open till she was ready, and he could not force an entrance before it was too late.

There were matches on the table, and a piece of taper, with the sealing-wax. It would be safer to burn than to tear, but the pleasure would be less.

. . . She stared at it.

The manuscript had cost him many, many hours of labour, and it would be with the cry of a parent bereaved that he would discover his loss. It was not pity, however, which restrained her hand. A subtle prudence prevailed, by reminding her that with the destruction of his novel she would lose a secret source of information. Her violence, too, would show him the depth of her wound, and set him on his guard. She would outwit herself. It

would be wiser to watch the mirror of his duplicity until she was able to confront him and this woman with irrefutable evidence of their guilt...

"But he does not know that I love him," she reflected, in gloomy triumph. "The love scenes are imaginary, at any rate. He cannot show his book to her and say: 'She spoke to me so, she kissed me so. I held her heart in my hands and made a sacrifice of it to you."

Her lips fell apart; she remained dreaming. His word-pictures drew themselves in air for her. She saw the doctor and his wife; they had her face and Anthony's; the passion ever on the woman's side, mere fondness on the man's. She clung to him, and he caressed her, smiling, and turned away.

"So might it have been with us," she mused, "only my folly was cured in time."

There were voices and footsteps in the hall.

She sprang up, hastily replaced the manuscript, and unlocked the door.

Anthony had brought a friend home to dinner. She talked to the man awhile, and went away to dress.

She was finishing when her husband came into the room, and lingered beside her.

"Do you want anything?" she asked brusquely.

"I seem to have seen so little of you to-day," he said.

The wistfulness of his voice made her frown.

"What a terrible deprivation!"

"I believe you think I am too sentimental," he said, chagrined.

"Oh, not at all! 'Sentimental' is by no means the word I should apply to you."

"Give it a name, then. Tell me my crime!" He was painfully jocular.

"Not yet," said Alice, with a brilliant flash of her dark eyes. "Some day, perhaps. Do you like my new dress?"

"You look beautiful in everything, my love. The effect, indeed, is charming."

"I knew you would be charmed," she said. "One may always rely upon you to say the right thing."

Her neck and arms were bare; he bent his head and kissed her throat.

"My wife!"

Her bosom heaved under the lace. She would have kissed him back in a flush of emotion, but the memory of Laura Standish restrained her. The sudden colour faded from her cheeks. She fastened a brooch in her dress and turned away.

"What have you done with your guest, Anthony?"

He ground his teeth afterwards. Why was he such a fool as to lay himself open to these continual

rebuffs? Again he asked himself the old unanswered question: Did she mean to snub him, or was her manner merely the carelessness of indifference? He could not make out, also, whether she had changed towards him, or whether he was more sensitive to her treatment of him than he used to be. He never sulked, supposing that she did not know she hurt him. The fault, he concluded, was in her lack of love for him, and it was useless to complain of what she could not help. Nevertheless, over dinner a previous idea recurred to him—the idea that she was not quite so happy as she used to be. She seemed to find it more difficult to laugh, and the animation which she had displayed in the first weeks of marriage was not so noticeable.

He had a letter from Laura by the last post; Alice recognized the handwriting as the butler brought it in on a tray. He put it in his pocket without opening it, and continued his conversation with the guest—a piece of indifference which struck her as mere ostentation, and aroused her scorn and ire.

"I should find it easier to forgive him if he opened it eagerly," she thought. "I hate hypocrisy!"

When the guest went, Anthony accompanied him out into the hall, and remained there for several moments after the door shut. She emerged from the drawing-room suddenly to find him reading a

letter, and her imagination detected embarrassment in his voice.

"Are you going to bed already, Alice?"

"No," she said, and fetched something from another room—a book she was reading.

He followed her back to the drawing-room, and lingered as though he wished to talk; but she took no notice of him, immersing herself in her book, and he shut himself in his study presently.

As soon as he was gone she put the book down.

"He is more careful with his letters than his hero," she said, between her teeth. "I only see the outside of hers. It is the third time this week that she has written to him."

He had ceased almost entirely to allude to Laura, supposing Alice to possess no interest in her whatever. It was her mood, of course, to regard his reticence as secrecy—secrecy and guilt—and the fever which heated her blood was heightened by its suppression. Nobody but herself could know the effort it cost her to sit still and feign composure before her husband and other people; but again and again he had betrayed his impression that she did not care for him, and her warped imagination found lively cause for congratulation in his ignorance of the truth.

It was a relief, under these circumstances, to be

alone. She rose, passing her hand across her brow, and began to pace to and fro. Sometimes she remembered to wonder at herself for her indifference to the material comforts which had made her happy a little while ago. The refinements and luxuries of the home she had once envied her employer, no longer represented the acme of desire to the woman who had become his wife. Her heart was hungry; and fine raiment, soft lying, rich living, could not feed it as they used to do.

The contrast between past and present struck her to-night, and the thought came to her that she had been happier at Mrs. Wilson's boarding-house than she was now. General dissatisfaction had been succeeded by an anguish which was devouring her like vitriol, corroding the healthy impulses of her nature, eating away body and soul. She was so possessed by the one idea that she could see nothing as it really was. Her prejudiced view distorted all her husband said or did, found double meanings in his simplest words, and tore herself to pieces in jealousy as unfounded as it was possible to be. She loved him. No humiliated pride could help her to persuade herself that she did not care. She wanted him at her feet; she wanted him as much hers as though all other women were dead. He should not look at any save her; she would have chained his eyes, his hands, his very thoughts to hers. It was

not in her blood to be reasonable in a matter which affected her so deeply; she was not of milk-and-water breed.

Her brain swam when she had been exciting herself a little while. She tried to leave off thinking, but could not succeed. She tortured herself by imagining how different everything would be if he loved her as she loved him; her brow clouded and her breath quickened with memories of Laura Standish. By-and-by, because her emotions varied with the moments, she stole, from excess of longing, to his door.

She leaned against the wall outside. The servants had gone to bed. She fancied she could hear the scratching of his pen; once, certainly, she heard him sigh. Was he unhappy too? She longed to rush in and throw herself at his feet, and beg him to forget that she was only his wife, and love her as he loved the other woman.

The creak of a board frightened her away. She fled back to the drawing-room like a mouse, her heart beating violently, her eyes scared. He did not remember how late it was; he was absorbed in the book she hated, and did not think of her.

There was a fresh grievance to nourish henceforward. She told herself that neglect was the natural outcome of indifference. She was outside his true life. Although she was his wife, she dwelt

alone while he divided his real self between Laura Standish and his book. Her spirit and his had never held that communion, without which their legal union was not a sacrament, but a curse.

She pushed her black hair from her brow with tremulous hands.

"O God! that I were dead," she wailed.

But if she were dead there would be nothing to prevent his dwelling in peace with her enemy; and she could not bear to think of that.

Chapter XVI

RS. STANDISH'S last note was full of woes as usual. The landlord of the furnished flat she had taken had failed to fulfil his agreement in some trifling particular which worried her; would Anthony "come round"?

It was nothing but an excuse to send for him of course, and he had never the heart to decline. She was aware by this time, he presumed, that he did not care for her. If she did not feel humiliated by his society, and insisted upon it, he need not feel reproached by her regret.

He found her in a becoming wrapper at four in the afternoon. She was not well, she said. A pipe leaked through her bedroom ceiling, and she was not going to repair other people's ceilings, or die of pneumonia. Anthony suggested that the leakage probably concerned the office of the mansions, and not her landlord, and promised to interview the manager as he went down-stairs.

"How practical you are," she sighed. "It is

such a boon to have a man about. How is your wife?"

"Very well-at least, I think so."

"She hasn't been to see me," said Laura.

"No doubt she will pay you a visit soon."

"You are turned into such a reticent, self-contained, queer sort of fellow, that one can't tell."

"I am very fond of her," he said. "You may

believe it."

"As fond as you once were of me?"

"My dear Laura, what a leading question!"

"I can't quite make either of you out," she said.

"Pray don't try," he implored.

"I can't help it. I am so interested in you. It is legitimate to be interested in one's cousin, is it not? Let us be quite proper!"

He sat silent and annoyed. It was the first time that she had openly reverted to the forbidden topic, although her manner was always plaintively, affectedly sentimental when they were alone.

"I don't want to frighten you away again," she said, "and I didn't mean to say anything, but it slipped out unawares, so I may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb. That's vulgar, isn't it, and you are shuddering? I will ask my second question: does she care for you?"

He remained gazing at her like a basilisk.

"Are you stricken?" she cried, with sudden passion. "Speak—speak! You shall! I swear that you shall not leave me till you do. Does she love you?"

"No!" he said, in a jerk.

A soft sigh broke from the woman's lips, and she hugged herself, rocking gently in her chair.

"I knew it!" she said. "I have seen for some time that you were not happy. You love her and she does not love you. It is like retribution. Oh, you fool, Anthony, to let a girl play with you!"

"Do you want to make me sorry that I told

you?" he asked.

"No, but I would have you see your folly."

- "A man is as he is made," he said rather sulkily. "She pleases me."
- "The old nonsense! You have not outgrown that, then!"
 - "She pleases me," he reiterated.
 - "And you let her see it!"
 - "Perhaps I do."
- "Folly! folly!" she burst out. "You had some pride once."

"I have a little now; but what is a man to do?"

His tone was of despair.

She moaned, and began to weep, to his horror, and relieve herself with incoherent murmurs.

"You have trodden on me, humiliated me, and

now it's your turn. But I forgive you. I am sorry you are unhappy. It does seem hard: it's hard on me."

"I wish you wouldn't cry," he said, hoarsely.

"I would have made you happy."

"It's too late to think that."

"I should like to tell her a few things that would do her good."

"You can't help me—nobody can. I must go through this alone. But I am grateful for your sympathy, Laura!"

"It isn't sympathy," she said, "it's—it's aggravation at the 'cussedness' of fate. You deserve what you've got—yes, you do! You've broken my heart and your own as well. You are as lonely as I am. It's cheerful, isn't it? I hope you like it!"

"We shall get used to it," he said, gloomily. "Don't taunt me; one can't undo what's done."

The door opened.

"Mrs. Anthony Verschoyle."

Mrs. Standish rose from her tragic pose on the couch as Alice entered the room. The two women measured each other with a glance; Alice was smiling.

"Oh, are you here, Anthony?" she said. "I thought I might find you."

He was in a rage. He had been caught in a



"The two women measured each other with a glance." Page 182.



questionable position, which was none of his making, and however little Alice cared for him, she would surely demand an explanation.

Her face had flushed a little, and as he watched her his anger left him. Was she stirred? If she were only wounded deep enough to feel, he would forgive his folly for allowing Laura to make him a scene.

It struck him that he had rarely seen her look so well. The colour in her cheeks became her; her toilet was perfect; there was a fineness about her carriage, in the pose of her head; her black eyes were full of fire.

Laura was shaken. Usually she was equal to any occasion, but for once she could neither command her features nor her voice.

Alice took no notice, however. She sank into a chair, and opened the conversation herself.

"I should have called before," she said, "but I thought you would not want any one till you had quite settled yourself in your new abode."

"I had so much trouble to find it," murmured Laura, recovering herself. "House-agents are so tiresome. They send one all over London after the most impossible places."

"It is a pretty flat," said Alice. "I consider that you have done very well. Have you taken it for a long period?"

"Only for six months," said Mrs. Standish. "One never knows what is going to happen. I have the option of renewing for another six. I am sure your husband must be glad that I am settled at last. He has been so kind, and has taken so much trouble to help me. I don't know what I should have done without him."

She had recovered her self-control, although she was still uneasy. She was not the sort of woman who finds it possible to admire a rival, and Alice was of a type for which she had no sympathy or comprehension; but she could not believe that anybody could be such a fool as to overlook her agitation. Poor fellow! what would he say when his wife took him home? She was very worried about it. Alice had been blind, apparently, until this moment, but if this contretemps had awakened her she would take more care of her husband in future. It was evident that she did not intend to make a row, however, and it was necessary for the hostess to play her part as well.

She ordered tea, and talked about the last new play, which she had seen *sub rosâ*, in spite of her mourning; and the morose Anthony, lost in admiration of women's powers of dissimulation, came out of his shell and joined the conversation.

Alice remained the usual twenty minutes and five longer. She rose, Anthony also.

"So delighted to have seen you both," simpered Laura. "Anthony is going to worry the estate office to attend to a leakage which is spoiling my bed-room ceiling. You won't forget, will you, Anthony? I am so sorry to have troubled you over such a trifle, but I was always a helpless, impractical creature, you know, and you are the only male in our small family. I shall certainly have to find another husband at once, if it is only to save you the worry of looking after me!"

Anthony smiled faintly; he felt that her fluency was forced. Alice did not attempt to smile: she simply stared at the other woman with her big grave eyes.

"Come and see me again soon, won't you?" said

Mrs. Standish to Alice.

"I shall be very pleased. I suppose you will start a 'day' now?"

"Yes, I will send you and Tony a card. But I

am always at home to 'the family'!"

Anthony had pitied her, softened towards her before Alice came in. He hated her now. Did she think his wife was a fool? The palpable insincerity of such gush made him sick. Before him, too. Decency might have kept her quiet. If she had remained awkward he would have had far more respect for her.

What was Alice going to say? His emotions

were mixed as he accompanied her down in the lift. If she demanded an explanation of Laura's tears, it would give him an opportunity of assuring her that he loved her alone. On the other hand, it would force him to give Laura away, which would be an unpleasant thing for a gentleman to do, or to tell a feeble lie which she would not believe. He looked as perplexed meanwhile as though he had really something to conceal.

Alice averted the necessity of a decision. She did not allude to the matter. She asked nothing at all.

At first he could not believe that any woman could show such a lack of curiosity. He supposed she was waiting till they reached home to begin. But the rest of the afternoon passed in silence, and the whole of the evening.

He began to think that he must be invisible, she treated his conduct with such profound contempt. He had never felt of less importance in the scheme of creation.

As she would not speak, he did at last. He was bursting to hear her opinion.

- "Were you surprised," he asked, "to find me at Laura's this afternoon?"
 - "Oh, not at all," she said.
 - "She is very excitable," he added, watching her.
 - "Indeed!"

He could make no headway against such a lack of interest, and the bitterness it aroused in him found expression, when he was alone, in an exclamation of despair.

"She cares no more for me than for a toad. It's hard, my God, it's hard!"

Chapter XVII

T was questionable whether Alice had any plans beyond her determination to conceal her jeal-ousy and hold her tongue until the proofs of her husband's infidelity were in her hands.

He should not be able to laugh at her. She would not make herself food for humour between him and Mrs. Standish. When she spoke at last, they should feel something very different from amusement.

As the days passed they drifted even farther apart. Anthony was as proud in his way as she was in hers, and the sting of her indifference could not but have the worst effect upon him. He had tried to gain her love by every means in his power, and failed. Henceforward he would no longer exert himself to please her. He had made as many advances as could be expected of any man.

When he was not in his study—and he worked feverishly hard under the sting of pain—he was at his club. The husband and wife began to see very little of each other. Formerly he had never gone out in the evening without her; now he took

to absenting himself and returning home in the small hours. If she had shown the least desire for his company, if she had only raised a beckoning finger, he would have come back to her, but her perverse mind only noted his defalcations without comment—storing up grievance upon grievance, and attributing his actions in every case to the other woman.

One afternoon she laid a little trap for him in order to test his truthfulness, and questioned him with a smile when he returned to dinner.

"Where have you been all the afternoon, Anthony?"

" At the club," he said.

She smiled still.

"You weren't there at four o'clock!"

"How do you know?" he asked in surprise.

"I called to take you for a little drive."

He flushed with pleasure, and she misconstrued the sign of emotion.

"That was kind of you, dear; I forgot for the moment that I had gone round to the Albany to see a man."

"What man?"

"You don't know him. I am sorry I missed you, Alice."

"Never mind," she said; "I dare say you had a pleasant time."

A couple of weeks ago, when the hot wave was still on him, he would have hastened to assure her that nothing could give him as much pleasure as her society; but she had damped the fire by continual application of cold water, and he made no reply.

Later he told her that he had been asked to put money into a new daily paper. He could afford the risk, and felt inclined to take it for the sake of airing his views to a wider public than his books were likely to reach.

Alice forgot herself momentarily, and looked up with interest and animation. She had had so many ambitions for him once, and her high opinion of his intellect survived.

"I should accept," she said; "I am sure nothing you were interested in would fail."

"You flatter me, my dear," he said, with a short laugh; "I can put my finger on a grand failure or two."

She did not understand him, but her interest had already gone to join the other interests she took such trouble to conceal.

"I am inclined to go in," he said, "if only for Laura's sake."

"How can it concern Mrs. Standish?"

"I am really anxious to bring some grist to her mill," he said. "She won't let me help her, and

she is spending her capital, which won't last for ever. I thought I might pitchfork her into the fashion column; she knows all about frocks, and she always had the knack of writing a smart letter."

To an unprejudiced woman his candour would have dissipated the least suspicion. Alice only took into consideration the fact that he was proposing to invest money, probably several thousands, in a newspaper, in order to enable Mrs. Standish to earn two or three pounds a week. Her blood boiled in private over this revelation of his infamous attachment to "that woman," and she spent a miserable evening at a party, where she had to simper as though she were enjoying herself.

Anthony decided to join the newspaper syndicate, and told her so the next morning; but she did not flatter herself that her advice had had any weight. No doubt, he had spoken to Mrs. Standish about it before it was mentioned to her.

He was away on business most of the day, and she felt disinclined to go out. It was fine, but her humour was ill-attuned to sunshine. She moped indoors, encouraging a nervous headache, too inert to move.

Anthony did not return to dinner, and his absence made her wretched, although she always pretended not to care. It was lonely without him. There was nothing to do but think, which was bad

for her. She wondered how he was getting on with the book. This was a good opportunity for reading the manuscript up to date. It was not likely that he would be home yet, as he had dined out.

She went to the study and turned up the lights. His writing-table drawers were locked. She had never known him to lock them before.

She sat down in his chair to puzzle that out. Whose curiosity did he wish to baulk—hers? It could not be that he was trying to keep the progress of his book a secret from her, because she would read it, with the rest of the world, when it was published. Were there incriminating letters in the desk? It was strange that he should begin to lock things up.

A morbid fascination held her to the spot, but curiosity would not open the drawers, and if she asked Anthony questions he would know that she had been prying.

She flushed presently. It was improbable that the locks were particularly good, and she had a bunch of keys in her pocket. She snatched them out, and tried them one after another till one fitted. Then she stopped, and sat with her hands idle in her lap, breathing quickly. What would he think of her? That did not matter; he would not know. What would she think of herself afterwards? A feeling of shame crept over her even now, which

curiosity fought with the usual arguments. She was his wife; he ought to have no secrets from her.

She turned the key in the lock.

Still she could not bring herself to search the drawer for letters; she only took out the manuscript, which she had a right to read, surely? It would be public property soon.

Her heart was beating fast. She forgot to wonder why the drawers were locked. Her hand trembled as she turned over the pages in search of the place where she had left off last time.

Before she had read a dozen paragraphs the old sensations returned: the anger which had brought such a glow to her cheeks, the fierce resentment. His word-painting was so vivid that it stirred her even more than her own thoughts; the keenness of his insight and imagination exceeded her knowledge of herself. She could not have described the passion which consumed her half as well as he who did not feel it.

"That is true, and that," she told herself. "Oh, how true it is!"

There were even revelations, which she stopped a moment to consider, and always to admit; there were other moments when her heart leapt with his brain at some inevitable conclusion or apt phrase whose vitality sent a thrill of pleasure through the pain, and in the midst set her dreaming. How a

man with such a fund of sympathy and comprehension might have filled her life if only he had cared! She read on.

The unhappy wife, consumed by jealousy, is struck by the resemblance between her own fate and her mother's. The inevitable thought has come. The mother killed the husband who betrayed her; the daughter's hand clasps a knife. It is her mother's face she seems to see in the glass before her; her mother's eyes, feverish and wild, her mother's bloodless, twitching lips. "The sins of the fathers." . . . The old, old phrase mingles in her ears with the tolling of a prison bell for execution. The child of the murderess, bred in the shadow of the gallows, feels the irresistible hand of destiny upon her, impelling her to crime. She knows now why she has been set apart; why, at the happiest moment of her life, a chill has touched her: why she has never been able to escape from the gloom of her childhood. Her mother's nature is in her, her mother's flesh and blood. As in a lookingglass she sees history repeat itself. It is her fate, pre-ordained from birth, to kill the man she loves.

Alice raised her eyes from the manuscript. She was crimson; her eyes, which burned like coals, looked sunken; she felt hot, and her breath came quickly, and the rushing blood deafened her.

She gazed before her at the writing on the wall.

"The sins of the fathers," she murmured.

She was paler now than she had formerly been red. The ebbing colour left her cheeks ashen, almost livid. She put the manuscript on the table, and leaned her elbows on it, and her chin upon her hands. What pictures passed before her eyes then, what ideas through her head, God only knows; but she and the creation of his pen were merged in one, and this morbid, maddened thing of fancy, who was born of her flesh, laid hands upon her, and claimed her soul.

Amidst the countless emotions which seethed within her, silent, deadly, like a furnace at whiteheat, was wonder-wonder that he should have dared to write as he had done. She was his wife; he was the man; the other woman, who stood, mocking, gibing by, had the red hair and blue eyes she hated. Those sly, appealing blue eyes; the white hands, too long, thin, with the pointed nails; the undulating figure. How dared he write it! How dared he confess so much, name his punishment, slay himself! With what æsthetic humour must he be moved as he shrived himself to the world! She fancied his mood as it had never been: laughed presently as he had never laughed, with the lips stretched wide over white teeth, of a snarling dog. She seemed to divine his inmost mood: the sentimental dalliance, the graceful regrets, the eternal

inquisitiveness which made him fall to for ever pulling his soul to pieces as he was pulling hers. It was easy to imagine how the temptation to write truth had conquered prudence: always the artist first. But the end; how would he manage the end?

The girl realized the trend of her thoughts with a low cry, and covered her face.

"O my God! what am I thinking about?"

A fit of shuddering seized her. She became afraid of the solitude, the silence, the night. This woman, who flamed across these pages, terrified her. It was as though she saw herself in Hell. She would not touch the manuscript again or look at it. It was a thing of evil, polluting her mind with ideas she dare not harbour. How she wished that she had not opened that locked drawer! She no longer thought of seeking an illicit correspondence. She had found enough to occupy her mind for many days. In future she would have a horror of this room.

She left it now, after replacing the manuscript and re-locking the drawer, with a leaden weight on her chest, a sensation within her as though her heart were sinking through her body. Eve was paying for her curiosity. She had eaten the forbidden fruit, and her punishment had begun.

"I should think that he kept it from me pur-

posely," she mused, "only that he does not know I suspect him."

She knew how he was going to end the book; the inevitable trend of events was clear to her now—unless he intended to make the wretched girl conquer the hereditary taint, and rise above the fate mapped out for her. She did not believe this, however. The morbid tone of the story had gripped her, and would not let her go; it coiled about her: she suffocated with the love, hatred, anguish, and terror of this likeness of herself.

Perhaps the desire she had felt last time to burn the book had been the instinct of self-preservation. She knew that it was too late now. The *dénouement* had presented itself to her; she might destroy the thing, but it would live for ever in her memory.

She went back to the drawing-room to wait for Anthony. It was a still night, oppressive, close; perhaps a storm was brewing. Electricity in the atmosphere always affected her. The girl felt queer. She sank down on the couch and rested her head on the cushion. Her mother seemed to be speaking to her; she went over that painful time as she remembered it—as the child had remembered it—and the old hideous impressions mingled with those she had acquired to-night.

"Anthony, Anthony, if you only loved me," she murmured, brokenly.

She hugged the cushion for relief, and bit into the silk and down. She wanted him. She was alone, with thoughts that frightened her; if she could have thrown herself into his arms and told him how she loved him!

She had always looked upon him as a good man, honourable, kind, affectionate, until Laura Standish came along. Surely, if he knew the pain he was causing her, he would make some sacrifice to mitigate it? She felt almost desperate enough to appeal to him; perhaps had he been here she would have done so, and their misunderstanding would have been over. Her ear strained for the sound of his return. Half-a-dozen times she strolled out to the hall, fancying she heard his latch-key in the lock. The servants had gone to bed already, and her sense of loneliness increased. She had no pride just now, only a great longing which was more than she could bear, and the mood to forget her grievance, and plead to him for what was her right. If he had come in just then, nothing could have prevented her from opening her heart to him. But he did not come. She waited and waited vainly through the small hours even to the dawn. It was five o'clock when she went to bed at last. The sunken eyes which confronted her from her toilet-glass looked deep enough to be the grave of her passion for him; where there had been the divine humility of an al-

most divine love, was the burning of an anger unspeakable.

So her mother had waited. She could remember a night—one of the few among the recollections of her early childhood—when she had been awakened by the light of a candle beside her bed, and the sound of a woman wildly weeping.

She did not want to cry herself; tears would only have touched the surface of her trouble. It would have given her far more satisfaction to scream, and dash her head against the wall, and bite her hands till they bled. It was only with the greatest effort indeed, that she contrived to conquer herself, and undress quietly, and get into bed.

She had not slept when the maid brought her tea at eight o'clock.

Chapter XVIII

ER head was burning when she rose again, her eyes were bloodshot; she looked haggard, almost plain. She could have slept now, but if Anthony came home and found her in bed, he would guess what a tragedy she had made of his absence.

Her temper had changed long before she rose. Once more her lips were locked, and she would have died sooner than tell him that her heart was breaking.

When she entered the breakfast-room, and found him there quietly reading the newspaper as though nothing had happened, she trembled from head to foot with anger, and her white face flushed. His smiling composure was the deepest stab he could inflict—the last insult surely to her anguish of the night! She had suffered, and he smiled. They had never been farther apart than at this moment, when she hated him even more than she loved him.

"Good-morning," he said.

If he had kissed her she would have slapped his face. Her own was too much of a revelation to bear

the light. She stood with her back to the window, her stiff eyes avoiding his.

"Oh, good-morning," she said, sarcastically. "You have come back!"

Her voice made him cease smiling, and stare at her averted cheek.

- "You had my message, Alice?"
- "What message?"
- "You did not receive a note from me last night?"
- " No."
- "That is too bad!" His tone sounded like genuine vexation. "I sent a note to you by a hansom at about twelve o'clock to say that I should not be back."
 - "Indeed. Where were you?"
- "I stayed in Fleet Street. We were talking shop all night—half-a-dozen of us!" He forgot his annoyance, and spoke brightly. "Our rag is to startle London. Poor old Clitheroe, he has the hopefulness of eighteen. His excitement leavened us all, 'pon my word!"

Alice did not speak. A smile as bitter as the greeting she had given him curled her lips. She went to the table to pour out the coffee.

Anthony's gaze followed her in some perplexity, and a little pain. He was trying not to notice her utter lack of sympathy, but it hurt sometimes beyond passive endurance.

He approached her slowly, stood beside her.

"You are not annoyed with me, are you, dear? The fellows begged me to stay."

"It doesn't matter."

"I hope you didn't wait up?"

"I waited-a little while."

"I'm so sorry. That beast of a cabman! I wish I had his number. I believe you are angry."

She did not answer, but remained staring fixedly at the table-cloth. The mask had dropped a little. He put his hand on her shoulder, with an inarticulate sound.

"Alice, speak to me! My dear girl, you are too sensible, surely?"

He bent to kiss her.

That aroused her. She reared her head, and looked him in the eyes with eyes that frightened him.

"Don't touch me," she said, drawing a deep breath. "Don't dare to kiss me! I am not a doll, to be picked up, played with, dropped. I know that you bought me—we both know that—but I have some self-respect, and there are things which can't be borne."

He was plainly bewildered and offended.

"I can't imagine what you mean," he said. "Was it a crime to stay out a night on business?"

She wanted to rave at him; a torrent of words rushed to her lips, but she choked them back with a supreme effort which set every nerve of her quivering, and seemed to strain the sinews of her heart.

"Take no notice of me," she said, hurriedly, a little piteously, pressing her hands together. "I am not very well, Anthony, that is all."

He was kind again at once.

"You are not well, dear? I am sorry. What ails you?"

"Nothing of importance," she murmured. "I shall be myself again by-and-by."

Her forehead was damp; she licked the moisture from her upper lip.

"Indeed, it is nothing," she added. "I—I—your coffee is getting cold, Anthony. Tell me about the newspaper."

He went back to his chair, not quite satisfied yet about her. She had softened, however. That outburst of incomprehensible passion had spent itself already, and she spoke subduedly, with a little tremulousness which touched him. He wondered whether he had left her too much alone. If she had given him the least encouragement he would have made a fresh advance to her, but her irritability just now—it had been more than irritability—had set

him thinking. She had spoken as though she hated the man who had bribed her to become his wife with a motive so different from love. Had it come to this between them—that she regretted her bargain so passionately? She had seemed happy at first, but he could no longer flatter himself that she was happy. The marriage, it seemed, was a failure all round.

She aroused him from a painful reverie.

"Anthony, don't you believe in free-will?"

He looked at her curiously, and did not answer at once.

- "No, I do not," he said. "Why do you ask?"
- "It occurred to me. Why don't you believe in it?"
 - "A man is made. He does not make himself."
 - "Everything is heredity, then?"
- "Not everything; and you must not misapply that much-misunderstood word. You may have a nose which is neither your father's nor your mother's, but a combination of both, perhaps leavened by an ancestor you have never seen. You need not resemble either of your parents apparently. The blend may result in new convolutions of the brain, in old ones defined or strengthened, which make you—the child of ordinary people—a genius, an idiot, or a murderer, but none the less the slave of your birth." He hesitated after the word "mur-

derer" had escaped his lips. "And heredity is modified again by climate, environment, circumstances," he added. "In fact, one knows nothing! It is as impossible to determine how the child of certain parents will turn out, as it is impossible to foreshadow the events of a hundred years hence. The fabric Zola built is a magnificent castle of cards."

"Nevertheless, you yourself are writing a book about heredity," she said.

"You are wrong," he said, quickly. "You do not understand my motif. I have no faith in heredity according to the common, shallow acceptance of the term; the heredity, that is to say, of direct, unmodified transmission of traits, except incidentally. My argument is that of a young girl, rendered morbid by awful memories and brooding over a disgrace which separates her mentally from her kind. Resembling her mother in appearance, she feels herself to be more and more her mother's child, as circumstances, similar to those which terminated her mother's career, gradually surround her. Given a highly-strung temperament, a vivid imagination, and you have all the ingredients of a tragedy."

"Your story is to end with a tragedy, then?"

"It must," he smiled. "There is no help for it!"

"I wonder you weren't afraid to marry me," she said.

"You!" he said, quietly. "Who was talking of you?"

"I am the woman in your book; we both know

that!"

"To a certain extent she is you, but only to a certain extent. Marriage has killed your potential passion instead of developing it as I hoped. The scenes with the first man are modelled upon your scenes with George Wilson. Those between husband and wife I have had to invent. You do not love me, you are not jealous. I can no longer imagine you animated by your mother's passion."

"Can you not?" she said, and smiled. "I am

sorry to be a disappointment to you!"

"In some ways, perhaps, I should have written more convincingly if I had never known you; but I am not sorry that we met."

"How kind of you to say so," she said.

He looked at her yearningly; she would not respond. The love scenes he had written had seemed real enough to her. She had seen Mrs. Standish in the rôle.

"Although," he added, "I should have been better pleased if I had not failed in my attempts to win your love."

"Yes, I should have been much more help to you, of course. It seems a pity. But you are so clever. I have no doubt that the book will be very good."

He was angry. Her smile, a certain flippancy, jarred on his earnestness. He gave her a look which silenced her, went out of the room and banged the door.

Chapter XIX

HEY were engaged to lunch out, but at the last moment Alice declined to go, asserting that she was not well. He thought she was sulky, and was annoyed: if she had missed an ordinary engagement it would not have mattered to him, but his publisher was to have been their host to-day, and Verschoyle was a good man of business. It was a fact, however, that she was unwell. There was the most natural cause in the world for her being out of sorts, nervous, unreasonable. She had known her condition for some time, but she locked her lips with the jealousy of resentment upon her secret, and would not tell him what ailed her; and there is one thing which seems to occur to a man so slowly. He would have to know some day—unless the end of the book came true.

She had begun to drop her ordinary occupations, her reading, her picture-galleries, her concerts, her friends. She no longer cared for anything, and it had become too much of a trouble to pretend that

she did. Even her dress showed signs of neglect. Her time was passed in nourishing the baseless jealousy which had undermined her life.

Meanwhile Verschoyle left her more and more to herself. The newspaper and the completion of his book kept his time fairly full. He sought refuge in almost ceaseless work because she would not encourage him to remain with her, but she did not know that. She only read what he wrote day by day when he was out, pressing the dagger deeper and deeper into her breast, and watched Laura's scented notes arrive.

He asked her to invite the woman to dinner, and she obeyed, but the insult of Laura's presence at her table inspired her with a fury which racked her frame. For once she failed to control herself, and her bitterness and sarcasm brought down a cold reproof from Anthony, thus forced to become Laura's partisan before his wife's face. Afterwards he reproached her with an anger which seemed just to him, an outrage to her.

"May I remind you," he said, "that this lady is my relative, and that I will not have any guest insulted by my wife in my own house?"

"Why should I pretend that I like her, and believe the foolish lies she tells for her own aggrandizement?" retorted Alice, passionately. "She would have you think that she is satiated with ad-

miration, and that half the men in London are at her feet. It is absurd."

"I do not see it," he said, rendered obstinate by her opposition. "Undoubtedly she is a beautiful and attractive woman."

"I know what she is," replied Alice, white to the lips. "One has only to look at her face!"

"What do you mean?" asked the man, icily.

"It is infamous that I should be forced to entertain her. Next time she walks in I walk out."

He gazed at her in the silence of intense anger, his nostrils contracted, his pupils reduced to pinpoints.

"You will do nothing of the sort! She is the only relative I possess, and she will always be welcome here. What is the matter with you to-night? It seems to me that you have the devil in you. Your temper altogether has been peculiar of late."

"Don't you like it?"

"No," he said, "I don't like it."

She laughed.

"What do you propose to do?"

"At the present moment I should like to box your ears."

"Don't touch me," she said, gasping. "Don't you dare to touch me!"

"Oh, 'dare' is a rash word to use," he said.

"You are not the only one of us with a temper. Do you hate me? Is that what is the matter with you?"

"Yes," she said, with a white light of passion on her face. "I hate you! now you know!"

He sat quiet for thirty seconds. His self-control had returned, and a consciousness of misery with it. He could not imagine that she considered herself badly treated. He thought, as she intended he should think, that the indifference of their early acquaintance had turned to dislike.

He leaned his cheek upon his hand.

"It is best to have an understanding. We will admit that our marriage was a mistake. I was the biggest of fools—the fool who thinks himself clever. Well, you are not troubled with too much of my society; in future you shall have still less of it. But whoever I choose to invite home you will receive civilly; and remember, since we are speaking so frankly to each other, that I bought a mistress for my house. You follow me?"

" Yes."

"Then I hope that no more words on the subject will be necessary."

He got up and left her.

He had become brutal from pain. If he had been indifferent or guilty his temper would have

been easier to control. She lacked the clue, realized no more than that the inevitable quarrel had come at last, saw the skeleton of her tragedy laid bare. Her prejudiced judgment overlooked the provocation she had given him, and only considered the fact that he had insulted her in championship of Laura Standish.

A gust of passion shook her like an ague. The blood mounted with a rush from heart to head. The silence which had lasted so long had had some restraining effect upon her. Now that the barrier had broken down and he had answered her anger with an anger as biting and deep, there was nothing to help her to resist the storm.

Such a mingling of hate and love burned within her that she did not know which was the greater. If she had seen him dead at her feet at this moment she would have laughed in exultation over the other woman's loss, than wept at her own, and hugged him close to her, and spent her life in mourning.

The last words he had written came back to her.

"... If she had loved him less he might have lived; but it was better to lose him once than every day, every hour in the day when he forgot her, every moment in those hours when he smiled at a recollection she did not share. She tried the edge of the knife which she always kept by her. It

was sharp enough, and her pain was sharper still. . . . "

Alice had never been able to understand her mother; now it was so easy to understand. Hideous thoughts filled the girl's mind—thoughts which threw her into a sweat, and made her fear to be alone. Such ideas would never have entered her head by themselves, but circumstances had conspired to put them there: her mother's example; still worse, her husband's book, which seemed forcing her life to an inevitable conclusion.

A Roman Catholic would have found relief in the confessional. She had to overcome the promptings of her morbid nature alone, and her task was not rendered easier by Anthony's certainty that there was only one end possible, under the circumstances, for her mother's daughter. She remembered every line he had written upon the subject. Did he know her better than she knew herself? Had she as little control over her passions as he supposed? Was she really pre-ordained to commit a crime which she sickened to think of? Was she a woman with a moral sense and a soul, or only a piece of flotsam on the stream of life, which might be blown this way or that with the current, or sucked down? She had always wanted to be good; she knew well enough at this moment what was right and wrong, and it was as inconceivable to her,

as to any other girl, that she should ever be guilty of such an act of violence. But there was the presentiment of her mother ever before her eyes. Her mother had been equally innocent once, and yet her mother—her own mother—had become a murderess. And Anthony had taken the daughter as the heroine of his book, so convinced was he that if love and jealousy came into her life, she would follow in her mother's footsteps.

Her anger against him was forgotten in self-analysis. Were such germs of evil really latent within her? Would they grow strong enough to slay her body and her soul? Her dilated, terrified eyes wandered round her in a wild search for reassurance. It might be that she did not know herself, and that she was capable of killing him. If she were good why did such horrible thoughts enter her head so readily? The unspeakable thing which distracted her would not even occur to the normal woman. It must be true that she was morbid, unnatural, doomed from birth.

A wave of sickly faintness overcame her. She started unsteadily to her feet, to run—where? She hungered for some one to assure her that her fear of herself was unfounded, and that she was no more likely to be tempted of the devil than her fellows. The fever which beset her could have been cured by a sensible man who knew how to talk to her, or by

a kind woman. She had no intimate friends, however; the whole force of her nature had been centered jealously in her husband; she had not even had a little affection to give away. There were one or two married women of her acquaintance, it is true, in whom she might find it possible to confide—one, in particular, the wife of Mr. Saunderson, the painter, to whom she had given the sittings he had begged of her. Mrs. Saunderson had once told Alice how deeply she regretted having no daughters of her own, and had kissed the girl affectionately at parting, as though she liked her.

"What would she think of me if I told her what I felt?" wondered Alice. "I must—I must tell some one."

She almost decided to call on the artist's wife to-morrow, then hesitated, and shrank. She would have to confess that she loved her husband, who did not love her; that she was despised and jealous of another woman: to explain, too, about the book, and how her marriage had come about. Could she bear such a humiliation? Could she, who had never confided wholly in any human soul, carry such a story to a stranger's ears? Half the truth would not do; unless she drew her position fully, clearly, it would be useless to seek a confidente at all.

She shrank more and more from such an expedient. What, after all, could this woman or any other

do to help her? Probably Mrs. Saunderson would be shocked, or fancy that she was hysterical and smile, and pat her hand as though she were a baby, telling her to go out and amuse herself and be a good girl. To be treated lightly would madden her; yet how could she make any one who did not know her well believe how terribly unnerved and miserable she felt, and how this shadow of her mother's fate brooded over her like a black bird of prey with its talons in her heart?

Instead of going to see Mrs. Saunderson, she went for a walk in the Park.

Somehow she felt reminded of her old days of struggle and servitude. The sense of isolation was the same, the restlessness of a craving soul, which hungered and hungered for the food withheld. Then she had been shabby. Now she was clad expensively and there was money in her purse. But those things were only as the husk; the kernel of her discontent, though accentuated a thousandfold, was the same.

"Why did he marry me?" she asked herself. "Why didn't he let me be? I began with nothing, he with everything, and he has made almost as great a failure of his life as I have made of mine."

She felt sorry for him in a sudden wave of sympathy for the disappointment with which she imagined him to be consumed. Of course, he had not

expected Mr. Standish to die when he married her. He had been unlucky too.

She knew this new mood would not last. She was too sorely wounded to condone his fancied offence; a touch, a word, a look from him would be as a spark to tinder, firing her afresh. Even her own thoughts, when she returned to the roof they shared, the feeling of him near to her, would be enough to set her heart beating again, and the blood running through her veins like liquid fire. She was not made to take things quietly, to play at saintliness, and accept what she could not alter with silent tears. A tigress had suckled her, and even the semblance of submission would mean to her a continual striving which would tear her to shreds.

There was water close to her feet, and silence round about. She had left the more frequented paths, and found herself beside the Serpentine in solitude. It took a moment, nevertheless, for the idea of suicide to enter her head, and then she dismissed that solution of her trouble without effort. The precedent was lacking, and her initiative in these matters, it seemed, was poor.

It was time to go home, and she turned away. In one of those flashes of illumination which we are all conscious of, she became the spectator of her own drama, and realized that to many women of

the world her position would seem not so great a tragedy. She had a refined and luxurious home, as much money as she needed, a place in the best society—the society of culture and of art, a husband who gave her sufficient deference and respect when she did not cross his will. Why should she care so much? It was foolish. If she could regard him with the amiable indifference of the early days of their marriage, she might be happy again, content like a cat, unquestioning. She made troubles instead of amusing herself, and letting him have his way unchecked. She had lived without him formerly, and would have been glad enough to accept a home without the man. This morning had begun a new era. It was evident that he meant to stick to his word and leave her utterly to herself. They were to be polite to each other, and she was to obey him in return for the material benefits he conferred upon her; otherwise their marriage was to lapse into a name. Why could she not think that it was better so? If only she could forget that she had learnt to care for him and let him go!

Needless to say she did not formulate all this in her mind. She felt it in that moment of intuition, and in another moment the night shut down again. She could not be what she was not. She was bound to take him seriously; for good or ill he was her fate.

Reaching home, tired out, she thought she had lost her fit of nerves in physical fatigue. Anthony was in. Through the shut door of his study she could hear the click of the typewriter. He rarely worked it himself; he must be very busy. Perhaps he was eager to finish the book, which only required a few pages more.

It was tea-time. She sent word to him, and waited uneasily. She dreaded, yet longed to see him. There would be an awkwardness in the first meeting after their quarrel. Perhaps he would not come.

The opening of the door flushed her. Weights on her eyelids kept them down. He spoke first, ignoring what had happened.

"Mrs. Saunderson was here while you were out. She called to ask if you would dine with her this evening. She will be alone."

"And you?" she hesitated.

"I have an engagement. You need not consider me."

His voice was toneless, hard; his eyes dull. He did not look at her; but drank his tea in quick gulps, and went back to work.

Alice clasped her hands in her lap, and stared vacantly before her.

It was curious that Mrs. Saunderson should call just as she was thinking of her; it seemed like more

than a coincidence. The impulse to confide returned; once more a longing seized her to tell somebody older than herself what terrible thoughts beset her, and ask for advice and encouragement.

She rose and knocked at Anthony's door.

"Come in," he called. When he saw that it was his wife, he frowned. "Why did you knock?" he asked, with the sharpness of uncontrollable impatience. "Isn't that sort of thing unnecessary, and a little absurd?"

"I thought you might not wish to be disturbed."

"Don't be affected, Alice, for God's sake! I have no secrets. There is nothing here that you may not see."

"Indeed," she said, "then why have you taken to locking your writing-table drawers?"

"How did you know?"

She blushed, and stammered.

"I—I came to find a nib the other day when you were out."

"Miss Ball is too officious," he explained, coldly. "She is always tidying my papers, and I prefer them left alone."

"I wonder you did not find it simpler to tell her so."

He shrugged his shoulders, dismissing her remark and her together as though they were equally worth-

less, and took up his pen again. He thought she was carping at nothing; she thought he was a brute.

"What do you want, Alice?"

"Does Mrs. Saunderson expect a message?"

"No. You can go or not, as you like."

"Thank you."

He was writing again before she had left the room, quite indifferent, apparently, to whether she went or stayed.

She was so incensed at such treatment from him, that it sent her out of the room with white lips and tear-filled eyes. Her stoicism had not lasted long. After all she preferred the "hypocrisy" from him of kindliness and consideration and a little show of love.

Chapter XX

RS. SAUNDERSON received her with a warm welcome.

"It was good of you to come," she said. "My husband has gone to some tiresome city function, and I haven't had a chat with you for ever so long."

"It was very kind of you to ask me," said Alice.
"I was sorry to be out when you called. How is your husband?"

"Very well, thank you. And you?" The artist's wife—a pretty woman of forty, a little faded, very attractive still—looked curiously at the girl. "I am not sure that you are as blooming as you were last time we met?"

"Indeed, I am quite well," said Alice, averting her eyes.

"Really?"

"Yes. What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing, my dear!" said Mrs. Saunderson, laughing softly. "I am the most discreet person in the world. I never ask questions."

The two women dined cosily alone. Nothing

could have been more favourable for a confidential talk, if Alice wished to open her heart to her hostess, and there was no one whom she should find it easier to tell. The Saundersons were old friends of her husband's; Mr. Saunderson admired her, his wife liked her, and from the first they had treated her with the greatest friendliness possible.

In a pause, Alice found her eyes scrutinizing the other woman's face. Most girls of her age pour out every secret they possess in the first attentive ear. Why did she find it so difficult? Why was she not like other girls? She longed for advice and sympathy, yet shrank from speaking of her trouble; and so see-sawed all through dinner.

When they adjourned to the drawing-room Mrs. Saunderson mentioned the new daily paper with which Anthony's name was associated, and congratulated her on its success. Afterwards she discussed his last book, and said enough kind things of him to win a young wife's heart; but Alice sat frozen through this praise of her beloved. It was as though a wanderer, dying of thirst in the desert, had been offered a handful of sweets.

Probably Mrs. Saunderson, who concluded, like the rest of the world, that Anthony Verschoyle had made a love-match, could not understand why Alice remained silent, with dim eyes and troubled brow. At first she thought that it was emotion which kept

her mum, then some vague idea that the girl was unhappy must have crossed the woman's mind, for she leaned forward, as they sat on the couch together, in the beautiful lamp-lit room, and laid a hand upon her wrist.

"Haven't you everything in the world?" she asked, softly. "You seem to me the most enviable woman I ever met."

The colour mounted to Alice's clear white skin.

"You don't know!" she said, suffocating.

"What, dear?"

The woman's face was sympathetic, her voice kind. Alice struggled with her painful reserve. Now or never was her opportunity. She wanted so much to speak, but her tongue was chained. It was not her nature to confide in any one. Deterring thoughts would rise. She could hear the Saundersons discussing her afterwards, wondering at the folly of Anthony's marriage, pitying him, perhaps, even more than her, for a little good-natured scorn would be mingled with their compassion for the girl who had sold herself for a home, to live disdained of the man who had bought her: they had been his friends before they were hers.

An infinite pathos dawned in her eyes; she was like a dumb thing striving to speak.

"I had a melancholy childhood," she said at last.

"It has left a shadow over my life."

"But you have married such a charming fellow that the present should more than atone for everything. You mustn't brood. You ought to go out a lot, and drag Anthony with you, and enjoy yourself while you are young."

"He is always so busy," murmured Alice.

"You mustn't let him work too hard. I had a lot of trouble with my husband when we were first married; he was so anxious to get on that he would have worked himself to death if I hadn't insisted. I believe our first quarrel was over that subject," added Mrs. Saunderson, complacently, "but I won. He thanks me now that he has reached a sober, sensible, and healthy middle age."

She did not understand—how should she?—and Alice let the moment pass. Her reserve had suffered such pangs of alarm that her first absurd sensation was relief that Mrs. Saunderson had not pressed the point. It was only on her way home that she began to feel sorry that she had not been braver. She was hopeless, now, and forthwith gave up any idea of being able to relieve her mind of its burden; and a renewal of yesterday's terror came upon her as she drove through the night streets, till her forehead and clenched hands grew wet, and her heart beat as though it were going to burst.

She was so lonely. How could she bear to go on living under the same roof with him, seeing him

every day, speaking to him, while he treated her as a piece of furniture? He neither knew nor cared, it seemed, what she was thinking about, and whether she were happy or miserable, ill or well. His true home, as she conceived it, was where the other woman dwelt; his heart was there, his confidence; in spirit he was less hers than he had ever been. She could give herself the pains of Hell at any moment in picturing their *tête-à-têtes*. She could see him kiss the red lips of that woman, and watch her languishing eyes, and his caressing hand.

Anthony was still out when she returned. She did not see him. All night her mother's image haunted her, waking, and sleeping in feverish dreams. Once she started up in bed crying out, realized the darkness with a sob of relief, and sank back upon her pillow, trembling, shuddering. What things she had seen! She wiped her hand upon the sheet, fancying it blood-stained still.

Chapter XXI

T dawned upon her suddenly that she ought to leave him. The conception rewarded her in its first moments with a sickly throbbing of the heart. Afterwards she believed that God had spoken to her. There was safety in flight, and a certain relief above all safety. She could not be the victim of a moment's madness if they were separated. He would not be able to goad her to frenzy thrice a day. She would be alone with a pain which might devour her body but never harm him or her own soul. Certainly it was a message. A fervid religious glow caused her a momentary exaltation. Religion had never meant much to her before, but she was in a mood to grasp at any help, and her eyes shone with the dim inward light of one who sees visions. Her mother's image no longer haunted her; she saw Calvary, and the instinct of flight quickened in every nerve of her body-flight from the man who had inspired her with a passion which would drive her to crime.

She tried to plan her departure reasonably, but her brain was not under control, and her thoughts

always wandered back to Anthony and Laura Standish.

How she would live after her money was exhausted she did not contemplate. Her sole idea was to leave him undiscovered without any scene to arouse the evil in her nature which she was striving to defeat.

She watched him curiously at breakfast the morning after her resolution was taken.

"If he knew, what would he do?" she wondered.
"Would he try to stop me? Would he pretend to care or not?"

His ill-temper with her was over, and he spoke to her as usual. Her voice sounded unnatural in her own ears, and it seemed to her that if he had had the least feeling for her, he would have guessed what a crisis was at hand. But he ate without realizing that anything special was the matter, and she sipped her coffee, and said farewell to him furtively with her eyes.

"I am going out this morning," he said, as he rose. "I shall be home to lunch."

"Yes," she responded, knowing that she would be gone when he returned.

Perhaps he noticed just then that she looked a little pale and weary, for he came up and smiled at her with a tenderness which had grown rare with him.

- "Is there anything I can do for you in the City?"
- "No, thank you."
- "What do you mean to do with yourself this morning?"
 - "I am going out too," she said, truthfully.
 - "Good-bye, then."
 - "Good-bye."

She followed him to the door with a certain doglike wistfulness at being left. At this moment she only loved him, and longed for a kiss. But he was no longer demonstrative; she had discouraged him too fiercely in her mistaken pride. The door shut behind him, and she was alone.

There was nothing to hinder her preparations now, and she dare not linger, fearful of her own resolve. She fancied that she had become so weak and ungovernable that she could not trust herself in any respect. She packed feverishly, with the help of the housemaid, who was surprised. When everything was ready and a cab ordered, she went into her husband's study. It was here that she had met him first; it was here that they had come together; it was here that she had read the manuscript which had given her such fearful half-hours. To recall what he had written gave her strength for the final wrench. She looked long about her, as she finished buttoning her gloves, then left a note she had prepared upon the table.

"The luggage has gone down, ma'am," said the servant, at the door.

Alice drew a quick breath, and followed. She would not take time to think any more about what she was doing. Any farewell is a wrench, but afterwards she knew that she would be glad again.

She did not direct the cabman until they had left the mansions. She drove to Paddington, and took a ticket for a little place in Cornwall, where she had once stayed for a few days as a child. Her object was to get as far as possible from London. It was a day's journey. The distance would protect her from any impulse which might arise to return to him, by giving her a long time for reflection on the way.

She sat in the train self-absorbed, blank-eyed, desolate. There was a monotonous aching in her breast, which made it a relief to sigh. She felt ill presently; her head swam, and her limbs trembled. She grew hot, fearing to faint alone there in the train, which was bearing her onward to an unknown future.

When she remembered that she had eaten nothing since yesterday, she thought that it might be hunger which ailed her, and, at a wayside station, managed to procure a cup of tea and a bun. It was feeble sustenance, but the spirit which had dragged her

away from him and all she knew, bore her up to her journey's end.

She left her luggage at the railway station while she went to look for a lodging. The sun had set, and the shadows of evening were already creeping along the narrow cobbled ways of the old grey fishing town. She steered for the church-tower which raised a weather-beaten head above the clustering roofs on the fringe of the sea. Quaint outer stairways met her eyes; strange corners redolent of fish and tar; great barrels waiting for the pilchards of autumn in gloomy entrance floors; endless coils of rope; chickens and children; women knitting in the twilight as they gossiped with a neighbour in their soft West-country tongue.

There was a tingling in the air, an atmosphere of champagne after the vitiated air of town; but Alice was not capable of appreciating anything just then. She had a dim impression of beauty in the quaint gables and roofs and stairways, and the fleet of luggers bobbing at anchor in the harbour; that was all. She was only anxious to find shelter; to escape from the eyes turned curiously upon the stranger, and rest.

The lighted window of a confectioner's attracted her attention, and she went in and asked the proprietor if he could tell her where she could find comfortable apartments.

"There's Rock Villa. ma'am," he said. "Have you tried there?"

"I haven't tried anywhere," responded Alice.
"Is Rock Villa difficult to find?"

The man spoke to his wife, and addressed Alice again.

"It's a bit hard to direct you to it as you're a stranger here, ma'am. I'll be pleased to show you the way if you like."

"Oh, I can't think of troubling you," said Alice, faintly.

"Sur' it's no trouble for him, ma'am," said the wife, a buxom, good-natured woman, coming forward. "You'll never find it alone, and it's getting dark, and I'm sure you are tired and want a rest and a cup of tea. You'll like Mrs. Permewan; she'll make you comfortable. She's used to having young artist folk at her house, and she knows what the gentry like."

"Thank you so much," said Alice. "I am sure I shall be comfortable."

The cottage stood alone on the edge of the sea so close that in stormy weather the great Atlantic breakers sprinkled the shingle roof with foam. The interior was a nest of little old-fashioned rooms and unexpected stairs and windows. But everything was clean though simple, and there was a sitting-room

with chintz-covered furniture, and a wide window to the sea.

Alice thanked her guide for his trouble, and engaged the rooms, and the landlady called her son, a strapping lad in jersey and sea boots, to fetch Mrs. Verschoyle's luggage.

Then Alice, having found a refuge, broke down. She had done too much for her state of health. The anguish she had suffered during the last few weeks had its revenge now that the strain was relaxed. The landlady, a good soul, sent for a doctor in haste.

Chapter XXII

KNOW all, and thought it best to leave you.

The relief, no doubt, will be as much yours as mine.—Alice."

The note, which Anthony had found on his writing-table, had caused him even more perplexity than anger. When he heard from the servants that she had really gone, taking her luggage with her, and leaving no address, he shut himself up in his study, white-faced and tense.

Rage at this moment conquered every emotion except astonishment. She had dared to treat him so. He who had done so much for her, and cared so much, striven so much, to be rewarded by—was it disgust? Her avowal of hatred had wounded him that day, and the wound was for ever bleeding; still he had been unable to conceive why he should inspire the woman who had married him of her own free will, with such intemperate repulsion. The phrase, too, with which her note began, surprised him: "I know all . . . " What did she know? What was there to know? And the latter

sentence seemed to assert that it was his indifference which had driven her away, to imply a reproach which he did not merit.

"If either of us deserves that, it is she," he thought; "yet her note reads more like bitterness than indifference, and her act is certainly resentment."

He sighed deeply.

"My God, how difficult it is to understand her! What is she resenting, if it is not merely dislike of me which has driven her away? Why could she not discuss her desire for a separation quietly, instead of leaving in this way? Her conduct is folly, and cruelty too. What is one to do with a woman in this mood? Does she expect me to let her go without more words? Do I mean to let her go?"

He leaned his forehead on his hand. His hair was wet, his palms too. Anger was giving place to forlornness and misery. He sighed again, contemplating the note which lay before him still.

"I know all, and thought it best to leave you. The relief, no doubt, will be as much yours as mine."

"One would think," he mused, "that I had hurt her. But how—how?—when? Has she ever seemed to feel? I have held my hand upon her pulse all the months of our marriage and detected no extra beat for me. What is my offence beyond being the man who wooed her without love? She forgave me

then; she spoke clearly of a bargain with calm voice and contented eyes. Whence does her anger come?"

He scented a mystery. The passion which had deadened his intelligence was over already. He could not fail to perceive that she fancied herself injured in some way; that her scorn of him was based on a grievance, although what that grievance could be he was as far as ever from discerning. One thing was clear to his common-sense: he could not allow her to sever the tie between them so casually. It was his right to demand an explanation and to come to a clear agreement concerning her future and his own.

Dwelling upon her conduct, anger dominated pain once more. She had treated him badly. He had more than fulfilled his contract; she had broken hers. Whatever fancied wrong had set her against him so violently, he would not admit that she had any right to leave his roof without accusation or apology, to humiliate him before his servants and his friends, to degrade him in his own eyes. Had he not conceded enough to her whims and moods and inexplicable reserve?

He remembered Laura. She would laugh, and if her mockery had made him smart before, it would make him burn this time. It was the thought of how he had cared for his wife which stung him most of all; the bitter, humiliating consciousness of

failure. He had offered her the best love of his life, and she had only cared enough to find deep cause of offence in some trifle which did not occur to him. He diminished in his own eyes, and was nigh coming to the conclusion that he neither desired an explanation of her, nor would trouble himself about her welfare.

Nevertheless, on the morrow—a fevered, troubled night of restlessness had intervened—his curiosity was alive once more. He must know what that absurd note of hers meant. If she was preposterous, it was no reason why he should not act like a man of common-sense. It was necessary to find her. She could not intend seriously to disappear from his sight. A letter would come by-and-by with an address, an excuse perhaps; at any rate a clue to her folly.

He waited a day or two, in vain. His restlessness increased. He would not own to himself that he held his breath every time the postman came; still he went on expecting; he could not believe that she would treat him so insolently. After all they had been much to each other; she was his wife; could any woman show such a cold-blooded disregard for that?

"And I was good to her; I was good to her," he told himself. "Before God I can swear that she had no just cause to leave me!"

He grew even more wounded, angry, humiliated, depressed. It seemed that she did not mean to write to him after all. The mood, so incomprehensible to him, which had carried her away, was more than a gust of temper; it endured. Was she hard after all? His passion answered that she was more than hard, that she lacked a sense. He had chosen an abnormal nature with his eyes open, in a cold spirit of curiosity, and he was paying, as, once upon a time, a woman had paid for knowledge.

"That she did not love me, I must forgive her," he told himself. "But that she left me like this I will never forgive."

He turned to his book. The work he had been engaged upon night and day, no longer appealed to him. Latterly he had been sustained in an effort of imagination by the feverishness Alice's propinquity had bred in him; the pages upon which he had bestowed his labour now lay before him lifeless and cold. He could not animate these still figures of his creation again. The woman was not real; his mind and heart alike disowned her. She was as dead as the hope he had once entertained of gaining his wife's love. By-and-by, when his emotions were under control, and the first pang was passed, he would be able to finish his task, no doubt; and the result would please the public, who were always his kind admirers. Perhaps one or two critics in London would

discover that the end lacked the conviction of the beginning, and that the author had lost grip of his subject; but the book would sell as well as usual, his publishers would be delighted, and—he need never see the fruit of his agonized labour again.

"If it were indeed the masterpiece I had hoped, has it not cost me too dear?" he queried, bitterly. "I have paid for it in blood—in blood! And it fails!"

He was wrong, it did not fail; but he was not in a mood to judge an achievement of his own fairly. He was passing through an experience which could not fail to leave its mark on any man. He was sore with his God and humanity; forced to acknowledge what no one cares to do: that he had made a foolish marriage. Looking back now, he could not conceive how any enthusiasm for his art had been able to urge him to such a step. That he had misread her temperament was humiliating enough; but he had misunderstood himself as well; he had believed himself above passion, done with it: he had started to survey mankind from aloft as a god on Olympus, and had fallen to earth and to a woman's feet with a shock which had sent him reeling for two days, and would take toll of his emotions all his life.

It was in the irony of things that Laura, whom he had once loved, should call upon him one afternoon. Conventionally she had asked for Alice, and

received a stammering explanation of Mrs. Verschoyle's absence which she did not trouble herself to understand. It was enough for her that Anthony was at home alone, and she came upon him in his study, where he lurked like a wounded bear, as radiant a figure as her widowhood would allow. Jet gleamed on her like the links of black armour or the scales of a snake; her red hair was an aureole to trap the sunlight, and her sapphire eyes melted in greeting of the man.

"So glad to find you in," she said.

"Ah, my dear Laura."

He presented a pained smile to her greeting—would rather have seen the devil at this moment than Mrs. Standish. Women's curiosity, hers in particular; he knew it. She would question and question till he hated her.

"Are you quite well?" she asked, in deep concern.

"Yes. Why do you ask? Do I look ill?"

"Why weren't you at the Saundersons' to lunch? I know you were asked, and they expected you. I was afraid you must be ill, and came most anxiously to inquire, as you perceive."

"It was very good of you. 'Pon my soul I cannot offer any excuse for my absence, beyond saying that I forgot all about the engagement."

"It is natural," admitted Laura, "and pardon-

able that your memory for such trifles should be bad. But why, in heaven's name, doesn't your wife look after you? She has nothing else to do."

Anthony regarded her strangely.

- "Are you sure there is nothing the matter?" she asked.
- "What can there be the matter?" He shrugged and smiled. "Don't I look quite well? My head doesn't ache. I have no pains in my limbs. I am not feverish! I must apologize to Mrs. Saunderson; but we are such old friends that the task is not formidable."
- "Certainly you are a queer fellow," she said, with musing tone and eyes. "How's Alice?"

"Very well, I believe."

- "I met an old friend from India yesterday," she added. "Major Duncan. I wonder if you know him?"
 - "I don't think I can boast of the pleasure."
- "We were at Simla together last year," she said. "He adores me still."
 - "Am I to congratulate you?"
- "I believe," she said, rousing herself from a dream, "that you are being sarcastic. It is a bad habit I should not have allowed you to acquire if I had had the management of you! . . But I am sure that he will propose. Shall I accept him, Anthony?"

"That is a question which only your own heart can answer, surely?"

"Heart! heart!" she repeated, pettishly. "You are not writing a tale now, and I want commonsense, not sentiment, of you. Of course, there is no question of 'heart' about it. I don't dislike him, that is all, and he has money." She fidgeted with the ferrule of her sunshade on the rug. "I must live."

"Yes," he said, after a moment. "It is all a matter of temperament. I dare say you would do very well."

He had been answering a thought of his own more than her question, and she stared at him.

"What are you talking about?"

"Was I obscure? Your pardon! I meant to remark that some women are fools enough to break their hearts over a loveless marriage; but that you are too sensible not to find ample compensation in an establishment."

"Do I deserve that—of you, Anthony?" she asked, with a sudden liquid note of tenderness. "Have I always shown myself so coldly prudent?"

"Forgive me," he said, gently. "I—I am out of temper with the world, Laura, that is all. You are right; you know how to love."

The unconscious accent on the pronoun would have told her much if she had not known already

how it was between his wife and him. Her eyes gleamed. Her nature was not big enough to pity him unreservedly. He had tried to be happy without her, to console himself: she could never forgive that.

And perhaps, though she did not taunt him, she had come to-day with some vague hope of stirring him to jealousy. That he showed none caused her chagrin, but made the step she had almost decided upon easier to take. It was certain that she had lost him for ever; under those circumstances, an establishment, as he suggested, would be her only consolation.

"But still you think," she resumed, restlessly, "that I should do well to marry?"

"Frankly, I see no other future for you."

"Yes, you are frank," she said, with a bitter little laugh, "and indifferent. Well, you are right. What is the use of wishing for ever for the moon? One cannot have the moon-but one can have diamonds and a carriage, and a new frock when one likes!" She held out her gloved hand to him. "Good-bye. I am sure I don't know why I came," she added. "I didn't really think that you were ill!"

He smiled, accompanying her to the door; she was as an open book to him in these days, and yet once he had found her as great and alluring a mys-

tery as his wife!

"I hope Major Duncan will be a success."

"Oh, perhaps I shan't take him after all," she said, flippantly. "I am a creature of whims, and the shape of his moustache may annoy me the next time we meet. Good-bye, again."

Anthony returned to his study and his black mood.

"I wish I could console myself with—diamonds," he mused, "or persuade myself that I could. My God, what—what has become of that girl? I can't stand this silence any longer; I shall have to look for her, at some sacrifice of dignity maybe. After all it is a duty. Can I let her have her head in this fashion? She must explain herself, there must be some decent arrangement, a provision made for her. Does she think I want her to work for her living again, because it suits her to leave me?"

In the morning he set a private inquiry office on her track, although he loathed the only expedient within his reach, and waited impatiently for the result, which he did not doubt. To his surprise there was a check, a baulk. Nobody knew the number of the cab which had taken her away, and the detective could not trace her.

Two weeks passed—three. Anthony grew very anxious. At moments horrible ideas crossed his mind. Morbidness was in her blood; and it might be that she had conceived a dislike of him even

greater than she had shown. Was it possible that she had made away with herself to escape from him? He suffocated, sweated, with a growing dread. He was no longer angry with her; he only craved to hear that she was alive.

She had taken little trouble to hide herself, thinking that he would be glad enough of an excuse to let her go. That he failed to find her was one of those chances which make up life. If she had laid an elaborate scheme for secrecy, she could not have disappeared more utterly from his sight. He found himself left, at last, with the sole resource of advertising for her, and his pride shrank for many days from that. For to address her in a way she could not fail to understand, would be to give their secret to every one who knew them, and he still hugged it, despising himself for the weakness of his shame. He had lied to his friends about her absence; he was afraid to lie outright to the servants, in case they knew more than they had admitted to him; but his behaviour was a lie, his assumed cheerfulness at meal-times, his pitiable suggestion that she had gone on a visit, and was coming back.

Chapter XXIII

HE window was open, and a pot of mignonette stood on the sill, mingling its perfume with the scent of the sea. In an arm-chair, supported by pillows, sat Alice. For three days she had hovered between life and death; for as many weeks she had lain like a rag, without strength to move or any desire to live. But she was young, and health was coming back. The nurse had gone yesterday.

This afternoon was the first she had spent out of bed since her illness, and the delicacy of her appearance heightened her attractiveness. Her complexion, dazzlingly clear, was tinged with transparent pink; her eyes were bright; and her wellshaped hands lay on her lap, blue-veined and dainty. She looked like a flower in her white dressing-gown.

Her life had been preserved—for what? A clever and devoted doctor had brought her back to the world, but she was not grateful. At first she had existed as a plant exists, absorbing nourishment almost unconsciously, passing the long quiet days on

the borderland of sleep, incapable of effort, of sequent or concentrated thought. But leaving her bedroom was an event which marked her return to the existence she would have been glad to escape. Already the old pain was reviving.

She was only twenty-three, and at a time when women who are beloved are surrounded by those who love them, she had been forlorn among strangers. If she had died, who would have cared? They would have buried her with as little concern as they had buried her baby, and when Anthony had heard of it at last, it would have been with relief, perhaps, that the gordian knot of his ill-advised marriage was untied.

A few tears of weakness and self-pity welled to her eyes with these reflections, and rolled down. She was used to the many noises of the city, and the stillness, the solitude, the monotonous moaning of the sea, acutely heightened her sense of loneliness. When she was lying up-stairs, she had been too ill to notice anything or to care; her mental anguish had been counteracted by physical discomfort; now the balance, which had quivered for a day or two between body and mind, sank once more on the side of memory. Her illness had drawn a temporary veil over the past, but the films were vanishing one by one. Life was returning to her as painfully as though she had been half drowned, and she suffered

the pangs of restored animation with the same resistance, the same desire to sink back into the rest of unconsciousness and death.

In a way her attitude towards Anthony had changed with her physical conditions. The fever had left her; the tropical storm had passed. It was grief more than passion and hatred which filled her heart to-day; she dwelt more on the loss his supposed infidelity had caused her, than on the wrong; more on her disappointed love for him than on the other woman's rivalry. She was no longer afraid to trust herself. It had become a source of wonder to her how she could have found a possible solution of the problem, or any solace, in the idea of his death. Her softened mood saw in the sequel of their marriage almost as much reason to pity him as herself. For him, too, there must be sorrow. She did not think that he was a bad man; she could not imagine any real happiness for him in sin. To care for this woman, and to be unable to marry her, must be a constant source of grief to him, heightened by self-reproach.

The next day she was allowed to get up to breakfast. The people of the house were kind to her, but she had no society, no one to talk to except during the half-hour of the doctor's visit. She did not want anybody; she had never found comfort in companionship before she met Anthony. Even her

doctor did not know who she was, or whence she came.

After he had gone this morning, she sank into a listless and drooping attitude in her arm-chair by the window. A dozen luggers were skimming out of the harbour like a covey of quail, their brown sails set, and her eyes followed them blankly. On the beach below the window a boy was whistling, and the shingles crunched under his active heels.

Once or twice during her illness, a question had entered her head which she had dismissed; but the time had come when it must be answered. Ought she to let Anthony know what had happened? The child that had never breathed was his too. If she had been too ill to grieve for it, if she was too miserable now in her desolation to care as, under happier circumstances, she would have cared, it caused her a strange tremor, nevertheless, to realize how closely their interests had been allied for once.

Would he have loved her child? If it had lived would it have made a bond between them, and drawn him to her at last? A mist dimmed her sight. She did not wish to be softened towards him by such thoughts. He had never expressed any desire for a child, or even seemed to consider the subject.

"His book absorbed him," she told herself. "His book and that woman. I shall not tell him!"

But she was too feeble still to be able to make up her mind without many painful vacillations. Though resentful of his right to any knowledge of her, it was not easy to deny the fact that her business in this instance was his as well.

Her eyes were red when the landlady came in to lay the cloth for dinner, and she was afraid to speak. She cried easily, too easily. She knew that it was foolish to dwell upon anything unpleasant till she was strong again, but her thoughts were beyond the control of her weakened will.

She was disinclined to eat, and would not make an effort to do so. She was upset, and tired, perhaps, with the unaccustomed exertion of getting up and moving about the room, and was glad to be helped to bed when evening came. There she lay and cried again, and found a star looking at her through a hole in the shutter, like an eye. It was such a long way off that it made her realize the immensity of the universe, and the smallness of her own share in it. She was so little, so unimportant, and the whole span of human life so infinitesimal, that it seemed absurd to make such a tragedy over such a small matter as herself.

"After all, in a few years I shall be dead," she thought, "and nothing will matter. I must be a philosopher."

Then she began to ask herself all sorts of ques-

tions, which were not good for her health. Who was responsible for the baby's death? If she had not worked herself into such a state over Anthony and Mrs. Standish, all might have gone well. But it was his fault, surely, that she had become so wretched? He had been cruel to her; nevertheless, she ought to have remembered and controlled herself.

"I should have gone away before," she said, throwing her hot hands out of bed. "It might have been all right if I had gone before."

She wondered what he was doing. In all probability he was amusing himself with Laura Standish, and had almost forgotten that he had a wife. She could imagine the little jaunts, the visits to the theatres, the suppers, they were having together. Her dark head rolled on the pillow, and a lump grew in her throat. No, she could not communicate with him; it was impossible; he did not deserve such an advance on her part. She wished she could go to sleep and forget for a little while.

The next few days were wet, and the grey sky and the sullen sea met in a mist of rain. As sensitive to atmospheric conditions as to environment, the dreariness of her life and its setting was like a leaden weight on her breast. The inanition of a tired soul was in the laxity of her limbs, the droop of her lids and lips. There seemed to be nothing to

look forward to. She did not know how the rest of her life was to be spent, and could foresee no alleviation of her present lot beyond that which the hand of time might bring. She might die young; she might live in poverty and loneliness as she had lived before her marriage; but that she and Anthony would come together again, was the one thing which seemed impossible to her. The gap between them could never be bridged over. She loved him too deeply to forgive him, even if he grew tired of the other woman and wished to be forgiven, which she did not anticipate. She had left him with the realization that it would be for ever.

At this moment she could draw herself a vividly incorrect picture of his proceedings. He was always with Laura Standish, not at Victoria Street, but at her own flat. She could almost hear their words of appointment, and see the kisses he gave the woman who was not his wife.

"And sometimes she mentions me—he never does—and laughs," Alice told herself. "I am sure she laughs, very softly, with her red hair against his cheek!"

The door opened and the landlady appeared.

"I thought you'd like to look at these pictures, ma'am. It's dull for you here all alone."

Alice took the illustrated papers, with a word of thanks. She had no particular interest in what was

going on in the world that she had left, but the landlady's entrance had broken a train of thought, and it was better to read without amusement than to resume her miserable meditations. She turned over the leaves.

Coming presently upon the portrait of a familiar face, she started and exclaimed.

It was Mrs. Standish who was represented, in a theatrical attitude, with head upturned in high light against a curtain, in order to show the excellent lines of chin and throat, and a liberal display of bare shoulders. If Alice could have doubted the identity of her enemy, the name was beneath to convince her.

She was so fascinated by the features she hated that she did not wonder for a moment why Mrs. Standish's portrait should adorn the pages of the Illustrated London News; and even when her gaze wandered on to the companion picture, that of a man, she did not realize at once why it should be linked by a true-lover's knot of ribbon to the lady's. The explanation dawned upon her senses gradually, almost without surprise, by the natural processes of revived experience, and she read the paragraph of explanation, worded in the usual way, as though she had seen it before.

"Duncan—Standish.—On the 25th inst. Major Duncan, of the Black Watch, espoused Mrs. Laura

Standish, relict of the late Arthur Standish of Bombay, at the Chapel Royal, Savoy. The bride, who is well known in Anglo-Indian society, wore a gown of pale heliotrope silk, trimmed with Brussels lace, and diamond ornaments, the gift of the bridegroom. The newly-wedded pair held a reception at the Hotel Cecil, which was attended by numerous relatives and friends, and afterward left for the Continent viâ Calais."

Alice's heart was beating fast by this time, and the colour had deepened in her cheeks.

"Who is Major Duncan?" she wondered.

She put her hand to her brow to steady her brain, which was beginning to swim. That Mrs. Standish should marry again, and just at this time, amazed and bewildered her. She had imagined an illicit love-story to be in progress between Anthony and his cousin; she had fancied them absorbed in each other, seizing every advantage that her flight had given them. And her picture had been all wrong, it seemed! What did it mean? Nothing—nothing could have caused her more surprise. The woman could not care much for Anthony if she were willing to become another man's wife, and Anthony could not be madly, culpably in love with her to permit it. At least no liaison could be in existence at present. Laura was not even in London;

she had left England a week ago with her husband, as though Anthony did not exist. And the marriage could scarcely have been unpremeditated. She must have been engaged, or at least thinking of this man, for some time.

A multitude of fresh emotions and ideas beset her. The ground on which she had taken her stand was not solid after all. In a moment it had crumbled and fallen to dust, and she was confused by the shock of finding herself without support. Had she misjudged him after all? Was it possible that he was innocent? If there had been anything between the cousins, would this marriage have taken place? It had not occurred to her before that she might be mistaken. Her natural jealousy, increased by the state of her health, had found evidence of his infidelity in a dozen harmless actions, and a coincidence or two. But now her nerves were normal again, and in the new light the news she had just learned cast upon the past she began to re-live it, to analyze, to weigh and wonder at herself. enormity of conduct had she brought home to him after all?

"Did I leap to conclusions?" she asked herself, with trembling lips. "Does his guilt exist in my imagination alone? Oh, my God, what have I done? Have I been dreaming, was I mad, or am I dreaming now?"

The journal still lay open on her lap, and the eyes of the woman she hated, seemed to mock her. At any rate the marriage was real, and the idea that she might have been mistaken throughout was at least as probable as his guilt, which she had been so ready to believe.

The more she thought about it, the stronger grew her feeling that her opinion of him had been unjustified, and the greater grew her agitation. She was still sure that Laura was capable of anything, and had tried to inveigle him; but was it not possible that her lures had been futile? There was no evidence to the contrary, and this unexpected marriage dashed all former suppositions to the ground. was not a boy, to be easily led away; he was not a fast man. There had never been anything in his conduct towards other women to which his wife could take exception, and the coldness which had grown up between them after Mrs. Standish's return, had been entirely her fault. He had been as affectionate as ever; more so; and she had snubbed him.

Looking back she could scarcely conceive how she had convinced herself that she was wronged. As she sought through the past, with feverish diligence, for her excuse, each incident that she examined slipped, shadow-like away. They had seemed matter for substantial grievance once, but among them all

her eagerness for exculpation could grasp nothing tangible. He had called on Laura alone; what of that? She was his cousin; he was the only relative she possessed. He had taken her to Paris; what of that? His wife had accompanied them. He had spent one night away from home: the frankness of his explanation should have convinced any woman in her senses that he had nothing to conceal. Laura's notes had come openly; as openly he had expressed his desire to serve her: was it likely that a guilty man would have dared so much? That afternoon, too, when she had called on Laura to find him there: what had she found so conclusive in the other woman's tears? She remembered, with painful yearning, that he had kissed his young wife tenderly one night, almost as though he loved her. He had meant to be kind, no doubt, and she had driven him away.

Oh, the trivialities, the dreams, upon which she had shattered the only home she had ever known!

Her head dropped back on the cushions with an inarticulate sound; her lids closed, her forehead glistened, her body was bathed in heat. The sudden revulsion in her mind had shaken her to the core. A change had come over the aspect of life—a change which presented elements of distress as well as of rejoicing. If she thrilled at the thought that the man she loved was worthy of her love, she

had the consciousness for her life-long curse, that she had left him when she might have stayed. Of her own accord she had forfeited the position he had given her, the companionship she longed for, all her rights as his wife; and it might be that he did not even know why she had gone. Not only had she thrown away all she valued in the world, she had repaid his generosity with insult, and worked herself into a state of excitement which had killed her child, over a nightmare born of her own morbid brain.

It seemed to her that at last she saw things as they really were. She was ready to believe now that he had concealed nothing from her throughout. He was not a liar; till that woman had entered their lives, she had always regarded him as a model of sincerity—a man too big in every way to stoop to petty falsehoods and deceits. What had possessed her to imagine that any temptation could make him change so much? If he had had no regard for honour, could he not have followed Laura to India long ago? Her husband need not have been a greater bar to their intercourse than his wife.

"Oh, God," she said again, "what have I done?"

She shrank within herself, writhing as though her thoughts were flames which scorched her. Why had she never seen all this before? He had shown every confidence in her, knowing that she possessed

antecedents which would have frightened many better men than George Wilson; and, instead of rewarding him with obedience and devotion, she had failed in the most ordinary duties of a wife. She had slandered him in her mind, she had repulsed his affection, she had raised a scandal by leaving him without any consideration of the embarrassment thus entailed upon a man whose life was public property—a man sensitive and proud.

"How he must hate me!" she whispered, quivering.

She had no mercy on herself. It was characteristic of her that her remorse should be as keen as the jealousy of the past. Her soul was in torment. She could have thrown herself at his feet and licked the dust; it would have relieved her to do it, and die before he could turn away.

She had deserted him, relinquished a state which appeared in retrospection like perfect happiness, and she deserved no pity; she would not admit that ill-health had been any excuse. She ought to have trusted him as he had trusted her, and not flown like a maniac to shameful conclusions without irrefutable evidence.

"If I had stayed, and the child had lived, who knows that I might not have won him in the end?" she thought. "He was affectionate towards me latterly, when I despised him for a hypocrite. Long

use might have made me necessary to him; what I wanted might have come."

She was working herself into a fever again. When the doctor came he shook his head at her.

"You are not nearly as well as you were yesterday. What have you been doing to yourself?"

"Thinking," said Alice. "Oh, doctor, I am so miserable!"

He was a kind man, and concerned.

"I am sorry," he said. "Can I do anything?"

" No."

"But you mustn't think," he said, "unless you can think cheerfully. You are not strong enough to take libertles with yourself."

He ordered her to bed, and gave her a sleeping draught which allowed her a blessed oblivion till daylight crept through the blinds.

Chapter XXIV

HE had the temperament which makes a fine art of self-torture, and her memory was painfully good. There was scarcely an incident of her latter days at the flat that she had forgotten. She was able to recall every false impression she had received, and the cause of it; every pang she had suffered; every moment of humiliation, of bitterness, of wild and passionate despair. But those things no longer hurt, because she knew that it was her own hand which had stabbed her with the weapon she had made. Her punishment was to be in the recollection of a softened look from him, a word of praise, a familiar touch. She had never felt lonely with him till this curse of jealousy had driven her soul back once more to its dismal isolation. He had been kind to her, very kind; she had been ungrateful. She wanted to tell him so; longed for some act of penance which should prove that she realized her sin of the understanding. So few people had been good to her in all her life. It would ease her conscience, comfort her a little, to say that she was sorry. She owed him an apology, at least, after all he had done for her.

She wondered if she ought to write to him. As the idea took shape, she evolved many phrases of remorse. A feebler nature would have suffered most on self-interest's side: she had wronged him; her own shamefulness pained her even more acutely than the price of the mistake.

In a month he had heard nothing of her. What story had he told his friends? She had left him in a position worse than awkward. However little he cared for her, she was his wife, and it was necessary for them to meet if it were only to discuss the future which concerned them both. The interview would be very painful, but she did not mean to spare herself. After some reflection she decided to send him her address, and ask him to come down.

Directly the letter was gone she would have given her right hand to recall it. There was not only her desertion between them; suppose he reproached her about the child?

There was so much that he might say, and although she had no experience of how he would resent a deep affront, she conceived him to be a man not able to forgive easily. At the best he would be quietly bitter, and stab her with words she would never be able to forget.

In all her life, unhappy as the greater part of it had been, she had not felt quite the same sort of depression that she felt to-day. There had always

been passion, resentment, the defiance of an injured soul to raise her, through pride, to the pedestal of martyrdom. She was no longer a victim; the grandeur of her tragedy had gone. Every comfort had been given her—ease of body and mind, the world's consideration, all the refinements of life with a man of culture, intellect, sympathy. She might have been the mother of his child, his confidante, his friend, at least; but her intelligence, of which she had once been proud, had not been strong enough to stand the smallest strain. She had behaved with the vulgarity of an inferior mind, the folly of a housemaid.

As the day passed her shrinking grew. There would be only one scene, and probably it would be short; but she could not steel herself to meet it. She wanted to hide. In a cowardly moment it even occurred to her to pack and leave before he could arrive. It would be a relief if he did not come at all. He might be as reluctant to see her as she was to see him.

She passed a restless, agitated night, and showed it in the morning. She could hardly swallow food, and a caller at the door brought her heart to her mouth. The uncertainty was very trying.

It was dusk when the garden gate clanged, and a man's step crunched the gravel of the path. In a moment she heard Anthony's voice in the hall, and

her head swam as the handle turned, and she rose dizzily.

His face was as white as hers, and set.

"So you have deigned to take some notice of me at last!" he said. "What have I done to deserve such treatment, Alice?"

"I am glad to see you," she murmured. "It was kind of you to respond so quickly. I—I thought we ought to have an explanation."

"Any explanation will have to come from your side," he said. "I have nothing to explain. Your conduct is a mystery to me—a mystery which I have scarcely the patience to discuss."

"You received the note I left behind?" she asked, faintly.

"I did, and failed to understand it."

"Are you sure that you did not understand it?" she said. "Oh, are you quite, quite sure?"

He looked at her hard, with stern, unfaltering eyes.

"Of course I am sure."

"It conveyed nothing at all to your mind?"

"Nothing. I did not know what was the matter with you then, and I don't know now," he said. "I was as good a husband to you as any man could have been. You had no grievance, not the slightest legitimate excuse for leaving me as you did. If you regretted our marriage, and found my company in-

supportable, you might have told me so at least, and we could have arranged a separation amicably. You went without warning. It was insolent as well as cruel."

"I didn't regret the marriage; it wasn't that. I made a mistake, Anthony," she said, in a curiously subdued tone. "I made a dreadful mistake. I knew it on the day I wrote to you. I was jealous; you didn't guess that, did you?"

"Jealous!" he repeated, sharply. "Jealous of what—of whom?"

"I thought you were deceiving me with Mrs. Standish."

"What put that idea into your head? It is absolutely untrue!"

"It seemed to me that she cared for you, and that you had cared for her—once."

"We will not talk about that," he said. "What happened long ago is no concern of yours. I have never been unfaithful to you, and—she married again the other day."

Alice's hands locked nervously; she gazed at him with parted lips. She did not doubt him. She had been prepared to believe everything he said before he came.

"Yes, I read of her marriage," she said. "It was then that I realized my mistake. Oh, I have behaved badly, I know! I admit that you have

cause to be angry; but were the circumstances of our marriage no excuse? I thought you considered that a home, your name, was good enough for the woman who sold herself. I thought you considered I had no right to complain of anything you chose to do, since love and respect were not mentioned in the bargain."

"I cannot understand whence you derived such an impression," he said. "Did I neglect you? At least you might have spoken to me, given me a chance to defend myself."

"I wanted to avoid a scene. I should have said things then, and you would have said things, which would have aroused the worst passions in me. At the best I should have been vulgar, unwomanly; and I did not wish to have reason to be ashamed of myself."

"Then I am to presume that your conduct has left you lapped in self-satisfaction?"

"No," she said piteously. "I am sorry, I am sorry! I beg your pardon. I only wrote to you in the hope that you would give me the opportunity of begging your pardon."

"If you had asked me," he said, "I could have told you a month ago that Laura had accepted this man. If you had approached me in a proper spirit at the first, I could have proved to you that your suspicions were unfounded. You treated me in-

famously. You gave me insult in return for unfaltering kindness."

"I read your book," she said. "It was that which put such horrible ideas into my head. I thought, as the beginning was true, that it was all true about—about the other woman and the rest."

"The book! When did you read it last?"

"I read it when you were out one day," she said.

"I unlocked your drawer with one of my own keys.

I knew I was doing wrong, but I could not resist.

It fascinated me; it put hell-fire into my veins. You were so sure that the daughter would follow in the mother's footsteps that you made me fear myself."

He started, the torrent of his anger stemmed, and regarded her strangely; a little colour came into his face.

"You cared so much?" he said, in a low tone of wonder.

"Yes, and more—and more!" she cried, wildly.

"Oh, you can think what you like of me now! I know it is all over. I know you won't take me back. I don't ask it. I don't want it." Her voice shook.

"It is better to be alone than to live with a man who is indifferent. I was tortured. I did not dare to watch—to stay. If you had guessed perhaps you would have pitied me a little, although my suspicions insulted you."

The flicker in his eyes grew to a flame. He drew

a deep quivering breath, and made a movement as though to go to her—a movement which he checked.

"And I imagined, naturally, that you went because you hated me," he said. "Ah, you treated me badly, Alice! Jealousy I could have pardoned; I should have been glad, God knows, to find that you were not as indifferent to me as you seemed. But you hid your grievance, you brooded apart as though I were your enemy, or a blackguard whom it was hopeless to reproach. Can you say with truth that I have ever told you a lie or deceived you in the smallest trifle, that I have not always shown you sympathy, that there has been a single thing in my conduct, during our married life, to justify yours?"

She sank into her chair, and cried.

"I deserve every bitter thing you can utter, and more," she said. "Be gentle with me, all the same. I am still weak. I have been ill."

"Not seriously?"

"Yes-very, very ill," she whispered. "It-died."

He stood quite still, staring at her.

"What died?" he asked, slowly.

"The child."

"Ah, you told me nothing!" His voice broke; his forehead was wet. "If I had guessed!"

"Did you ask? Did you care? The man who doesn't care never guesses."

"O my God, and you were all alone!"

Her face was averted. She sat with her hands linked loosely in her lap, and her eyes far away on the sea.

"It didn't matter. If I had stayed it might have been worse. I was in a morbid, dangerous state of mind. I took everything too seriously. And I am used to being alone. I have always been alone."

He strode forward, and knelt, and put his arms round her with ineffable tenderness.

"How is it possible," he said, "that you do not know I love you?"

She gasped as though her heart were heaving to her lips. She looked him in the eyes, and understood at last.

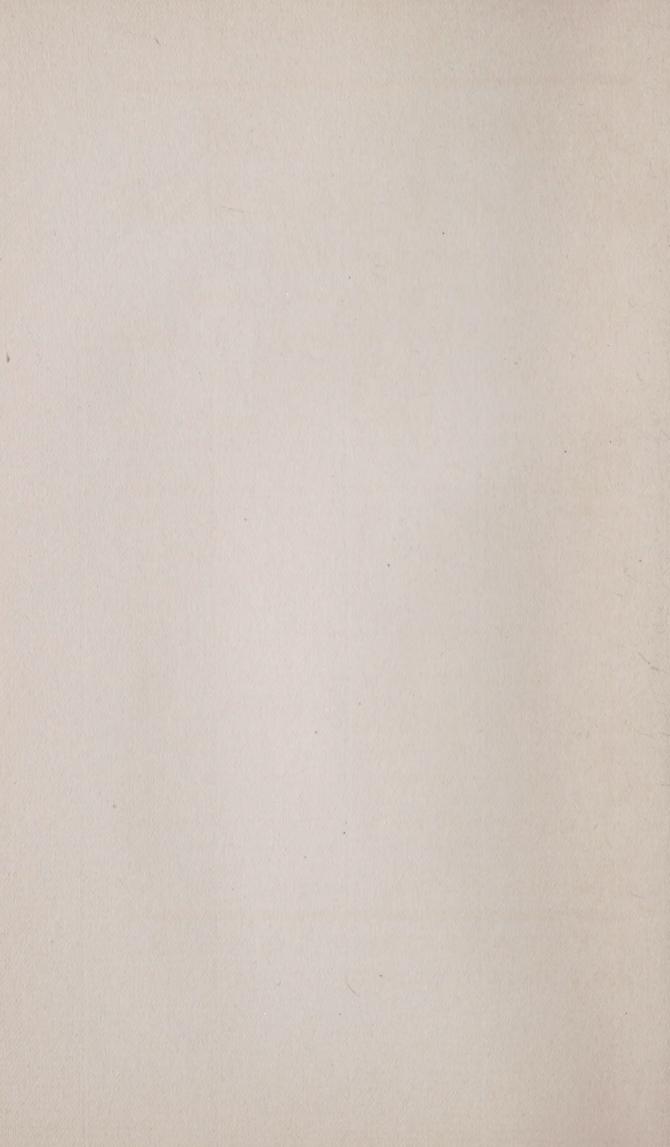
"You love me!"

"I tried to show it, but you would not let me. I could not imagine that you did not know."

"Oh, how I have tortured myself, Anthony," she sobbed.

She bent forward, and they kissed each other. It was their true marriage.

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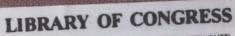
"Mrs. Clark is entitled to the thanks of a reading public."

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